University of Alberta

Elementary School Students' Constructions of their Final Report Card

By

Thelma F. Voegtlin

A thesis

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Dedicated to my parents,
Joseph and Florence Voegtlin,
who modeled for me
a love of learning.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore selected elementary students' constructions regarding their report card with a focus on their final report card. The intent of the study was to provide a rich description of the experiences that students had with the report card and the resulting personal constructions of its importance and significance.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 17 elementary students in one school -- five students in grade one, six students in grade three and six students in grade six. Following analysis of the data, three major themes comprising the students' constructions emerged. They were themes of mystery, monitoring and marks.

The students viewed the report card as being a mysterious document, filled with terminology that was difficult to understand and marks that were unable to be predicted. The students felt the report card was used to monitor their behavior and grade placement for the following year. The report card contained effort and achievement marks, although the achievement marks were considered by the students to be most important, because they were used by parents as a basis for rewards or punishments. It was also felt that good achievement marks may possibly lead to a good job in the future. The students were unsure whether the marks were indicative of what they had learned.

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A study of this nature is not possible without the willing participation, direct involvement, and support of many others. I wish to acknowledge those who have contributed in their own unique way.

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Table of Contents

Chapter Page

1 Introduction....1

Personal Context....1

Overview and Purpose of the Study....3

Organization of the Thesis....6

2 Review of Related Literature....7

Constructivism: A Theoretical Perspective....7

Knowing as an Individual Cognitive Process....8

Knowing as a Social-Historical Process....10

Knowing as a Cultural Process....12

The Nature of Reality in the Constructivist Perspective....14

Student Achievement....17

Assessment and Evaluation....17

The Report Card....23

Report Card Grades....25

Students' Constructions of Report Cards....26

3 Methodology....31

Design of the Study....31

Definition of Terms....32

The Site and the Participants....33

Data Collection....36

Pilot Study....39

Report Card at Riverside School....40

Data Analysis....41

Limitations....43

Delimitations....43

4 Findings and Discussion....44
Introduction....44
Theme One: Mystery - A Surprise Package....46
Student Emotions Surrounding the Report Card....46
Predictability of Marks....48
Confusion with Terminology....50
Theme Two: Monitoring....54
Monitoring Behavior....55
Promotion or Retention....57
Theme Three: Marks....60
Who Decides the Marks?....62
How Achievement Marks are Determined....63
The Importance of Marks....72
Relationship between Marks and Learning....78
5 Reflections, Implications and Recommendations....83
Reflections....83
Implications....91
Implications for Parents....91
Implications for Teachers....92
Implications for Administrators....92
Implications for Further Research....93
Recommendations....94
Summary....95
References....96
Appendixes....102

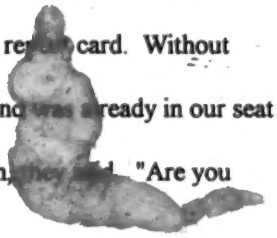
Chapter One

Introduction

Personal Context

Scene One: (1965)

The work of the day was finally over and we sat in quiet expectancy; waiting for the teacher to speak. Our names were called alphabetically, one by one. Since I was near the end of the alphabet, I had longer to wait. Finally my name was called. I collected my books and lunch box and went to receive my report card. Without looking at the contents, I headed for the bus. My best friend was already in our seat and talking to the guy that sat behind us. When I sat down, they said, "Are you ready?"



"Certainly," I replied. We organized ourselves and opened the report card. There was silence for a few minutes as each of us digested the information on the paper in front of us. Then all eyes were raised; we looked at one another. Finally Bill spoke up, "Okay, Math." And so we proceeded to share our grades.

Scene Two: (1997)

Christmas was over and I couldn't put it off any longer. Driving to the University gave me time to contemplate how I did. Will my professors understand how much I have learned this past term? Have I demonstrated what I have learned? Will my grade reflect the knowledge I have gained? How do my professors see me as

a student (learner)? How do they perceive me as an individual? Do they think I belong here, in this program?

Being a student again heightened my perceptions regarding marks and grading. I began to empathize with my students, considering the current emphasis on assessment and evaluation within the school system. What was their understanding of the grading and reporting system? Did they have the same anxieties and questions that I experienced in my first term of my Master's program at University? What meaning did they attach to the comments and grades on their report card?

I went back to view my report cards from school. Looking back at these report cards now, I find that they have little meaning for me. I recall that my main concern, at the time, was that I pass to the next grade. Having the best grades in the classroom was not important to me, although I did want to have better grades than my friends. I wanted to have the best possible marks with a minimum of effort and I found the school work fairly easy in elementary school. I don't remember receiving any pressure from my parents regarding certain marks on my report card and we were never given extrinsic rewards for marks. I always knew I was expected to pass each grade and eventually go on to University. Beyond that the grades were somewhat meaningless to me.

Having said all that, I realize that the preceding remarks are based on my perceptions as an adult looking back on a childhood experience. I wonder if someone had asked me about the meaningfulness of report cards and grades when I was still a child, what my constructions would be?

Overview and Purpose of the Study

Traditionally, the report card has been the primary method by which student achievement is communicated to students, parents or guardians, school administration and other teachers. Communicating through the use of report cards occurs two to three times per year in many districts. Each report card is the end product of an on-going process of assessment and evaluation of student achievement in relation to curricular objectives and designated learning outcomes, written within the context of government, district and school policy.

As a teacher, my current biases concerning the report card are based on twenty years of teaching experience. I notice that most students express feelings of nervousness about receiving their report card and I wonder why this is. Are they nervous because they don't know what's on the report card in terms of marks or comments or are they preoccupied with the expectations and reactions of their parents? There is an air of anticipation on report card day and most students quickly open them as soon as they are received. Some students seem surprised by what they see, others smile happily as they leave the room. I sense that many students feel a sense of "powerlessness" regarding their grades, not entirely certain why they received the mark they did.

There is a great deal of research on assessing and evaluating student achievement in the elementary school. Most of that research focuses on grades or

grading systems and examines teacher beliefs and practices. There is very little research exploring report cards from the elementary school student's perspective.

In recent years, there has been more interest in studying students' perceptions of educational experiences, but categorizing research findings has been difficult because "Research on the student perspective has grown out of diverse literatures, with different theoretical conceptions and varied purposes in mind. This developmental path has to date produced a somewhat unsystematic and sketchy knowledge base" (Weinstein, 1983, p. 289).

Other literature suggests that "researchers simply have not bothered either to ask children about what it is they want to know, or to become part of the student's world long enough to observe the construction of school knowledge." (Klein, Kantor, & Fernie, 1988, p. 32). There is an unfounded notion that children, especially young children, cannot speak for themselves (Sanders, 1996). Sanders cites Waksler (1986) who maintains that currently adults display a clear reluctance to take children's ideas seriously and often even express actual hostility toward those ideas. The reasons for not hearing children's voices may simply be because gathering accounts from children is both difficult, time-consuming, and technically difficult to study (Erickson & Shultz, 1992).

Teachers need to know more about how children interpret their school experiences if they are to educate a variety of students effectively (Erickson & Shultz, 1992). Reifel (1988) suggests "what children know about their school experience can be seen as an index of meaning that experience has for them -- it can provide us with their understanding of the programs and experience we intend for them to have"

(p. 62). Recognizing and understanding the child's point of view is a critical element in helping teachers develop appropriate instructional programs for their pupils (Brooks & Fusco, 1984 cited by Sanders, 1996).

As an educator, I am curious about the meaning students attach to the experience of receiving their report card. The purpose of this study is to explore elementary school student's constructions of their report cards with an emphasis on their final report card. I want to know what the report card tells the student about him or herself as a learner or as an individual and what meaning is constructed from the grades and comments. I am also interested in whether the children will make any connections between their daily efforts, activities and assignments and the grades and comments on the report card.

The exploration of students' meaning attached to the report card is based within the theoretical perspective of constructivism which claims that students are active constructors of meaning. Constructivists claim that school experiences cause students to examine their knowledge about themselves as learners and individuals. If this is true, and the report card supports students' reality and knowledge, their beliefs and personal constructs will remain constant. However, if the report card has new and discrepant information on it, information that is not in keeping with present personal constructs, the individual will need to adapt or reconstruct his or her personal construct to maintain cognitive equilibrium.

It is my belief that personal meaning is not constructed in a vacuum. Therefore, students will negotiate the meaning and importance of the report card based on personal experiences interacting with their social world; the relationships in

their home and school environment. The purpose of this study is to make the students' negotiations and understandings (constructions) of the report card more explicit.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter One has presented the personal context, as well as the rationale and purpose of this study. My personal biases are reported within the personal context. Educators and students are currently experiencing a renewed emphasis on assessment and evaluation within the school system. What impact does the reporting of this evaluation have on the students?

Chapter Two is an overview of the literature in two key areas. The first area, Constructivism, provides a theoretical context for the study while the second area, Student Achievement, address assessment, evaluation and reporting procedures. These procedures are governed by provincial and school district policy.

In Chapter Three the method used to conduct the study is described. Detailed descriptions of the participants and procedures used to collect and analyze all data are presented. Terms pertaining to participant selection as well as limitations and delimitations of the study are defined.

The findings of the research and a discussion of these findings are presented in Chapter Four. The findings are organized around three major themes which emerged through data analysis. Each major theme consists of several sub-themes.

Chapter Five provides a summary and reflections of the study. In it are presented reflections, implications for some stakeholders in the reporting process (e.g. teachers, parents and administrators) and recommendations for practice.

Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

The review of literature will explore two key areas: Constructivism, From a theoretical perspective; and Student Achievement. Each key area comprises several sub-sections.

Within the area of Constructivism, the following ideas will be explored: (a) knowing as an individual cognitive process, (b) knowing as a social-historical process, (c) knowing as a cultural process, (d) the nature of reality in the constructivist perspective and (e) educational implications.

The literature review of Student Achievement will be divided into four sections, namely (a) assessment and evaluation, (b) the report card, (c) report card grades and (d) students' constructions of report cards.

Constructivism: A Theoretical Perspective

I believe students' constructions of their report cards are influenced by their experience with them. These experiences enable students to construct and make meaning of the report card and permit them to understand their importance and significance in the larger social and cultural contexts of school and family. This statement assumes that children are not passive recipients of knowledge, but active constructors of meaning. This is a key tenet of constructivism (Shapiro, 1994) and provides the theoretical framework for my study.

Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning based on work in psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. Some of the key theorists that have contributed to my understanding of constructivism will be explored while examining their definitions of knowledge and learning. Some of these theorists, such as Piaget and Kelly, viewed the child as a rather isolated being, constructing individual hypotheses about the world, reflecting upon experience, interacting with the physical environment, and formulating increasingly complex structures. Others, such as Vygotsky and Bruner, thought of the child as a social being, "because we have come once more to appreciate that through such social life, the child acquires a framework for interpreting experience, and learns how to negotiate meaning in a manner congruent with the requirements of the culture. Making sense is a social process; it is an activity that is always situated within a cultural and historical context" (Bruner & Haste, 1987).

Knowing as an Individual Cognitive Process

Piaget, a cognitive psychologist, believed that the human is a developing organism, not only in a physical and biological sense, but also in a cognitive sense (Fosnot, 1996). This developing organism searches for coherence and organization in its world. This occurs primarily through a process of adaptation and organization. The schema, Piaget's unit of organization, is a cognitive structure derived from experience and governing behavior (Nystrand, 1977). Adaptation takes place through two complementary processes: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the

process by which an organism integrates aspects of its environment or experience into already defined physical or cognitive structures while accommodation is the process by which an organism adapts by altering its own physical or mental structures in order to maintain cognitive equilibrium. "New experiences sometimes foster contradictions to our present understandings, making them insufficient and thus perturbing and disequilibrating the structure, causing us to accommodate" (Fosnot, 1996, p.13). However, cognitive equilibrium is not based strictly upon a sequential process of assimilation, then conflicting or discrepant information, then accommodation. It is the interaction between the two poles of our nature; assimilation, which reaches out to embrace new experiences and accommodation, which is more reflective, that keeps the organism in a flexible, growth-producing state (Fosnot, 1996). Knowledge comes neither from the subject nor from the object but from the unity and interaction between the two (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Therefore, knowledge is a process of continual construction and reorganization.

Similar to Piaget's view of humans as organizing and adapting organisms is George Kelly's view of man as man-the-scientist (Kelly, 1955) -- "a categorizing animal" (Nystrand, 1977) whose ultimate aim is to predict and control his environment. In order to do this, she or he looks at the world through patterns or templates which she or he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. These templates or constructs are considered to be a representation of the universe, a representation erected by a living creature then tested against the reality of that universe. The constructs are tested in terms of their predictive efficiency as the individual goes through an experiential cycle.

This cycle has five phases: anticipation, investment, encounter, confirmation or disconfirmation and constructive revision (Kelly cited by Nystrand, 1977). "Thus each individual (1) anticipates one's experience by approaching it with expectations, (2) invests oneself by one's involvement, (3) encounters new experiences through one' investment, (4) either confirms or disconfirms one's anticipations as a result of the encounter, and (5) revises one's anticipations in terms of these confirmations or disconfirmations" (p. 7). Experiences direct individuals to consolidate some aspects of their personal constructs, revise some and abandon others. Each individual differs from another in his or her construction of events because no two people can play precisely the same role in the same event. Each is central in his or her own experience.

Nystrand (1977) summed up the similarities between Piaget's schema and Kelly's personal constructs. Both are ways in which humans organize and understand their world. He states,

> Each concept is an organizational structure, an interpretive framework. Through these units, individuals are said literally to shape their perceptions. Only by imposing order on their experience of the world and self can they understand these things....Each concept involves a notion of individuals intimately and irretrievably involved in their experience. Each concept implies that behavior...and each concept implies (and requires) a personal and tacit commitment on the part of every individual to the goal of achieving a closer contact with reality (pp. 8, 9).

Knowing as a Social-Historical Process

Vygotsky (1978) believed that humans are active, vigorous participants in their own existence and that at each stage of development children acquire the means by which they can competently affect their world and themselves. He viewed the

environment as historically and culturally shifting contexts into which children are born and which they, too, will eventually change.

Vygotsky maintained that learning and development are interrelated from the child's very first day of life. Each child has an actual developmental level (what a child can do on his or her own) and a potential developmental level (what a child can do or solve under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers). In between these two levels is an area Vygotsky labels the Zone of Proximal Development. This zone defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation. Therefore, the learning process is always ahead of the developmental process.

> "The essential feature of learning is that it creates a zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement" (p. 90).

Vygotsky used language as a paradigm to explain the relationship between learning and development. Language is initially a means of communication between the child and the people in his or her environment. As the child develops, language is converted to internal speech -- a way of organizing thoughts and learning concepts. These thoughts are checked, re-checked, and confirmed within the social structure and environment of the child. For Vygotsky, the most effective learning took place as learners, their peers, and adults conversed, questioned, explained, and negotiated meaning (Fosnot, 1996).

"The conceptual structures that constitute meanings or knowledge are not entities that could be used alternatively by different individuals. They are constructs that each user has to build up for him or herself" (von Glasersfeld, 1996, p. 5). Therefore, one can never say whether two people have produced the same construct even though they may have similar experiences. When dealing with the social dimension of constructivism, particularly in the areas of knowledge and language, von Glasersfeld advocates using Paul Cobb's expression "taken-as-shared". This accentuates the subjective nature of the situation.

Knowing as a Cultural Process

Most of our approaches to the world are mediated through negotiation with others. Even in a pre-language state, an infant interacts with its mother according to the social realities, creating jointly constructed worlds. Bruner (1986) considers this the child's first culture.

Bruner uses the term "negotiated meaning" which alludes to a dialogic relationship in which individual meanings are explored, discussed and finally negotiated to be of value or importance for individuals within a culture and the culture itself. He states, "a culture is constantly in process of being recreated as it is interpreted and renegotiated by its members...a culture is as much a forum for negotiating and renegotiating meaning and for explicating action as it is a set of rules of specifications for action" (p. 123). Fosnot (1996) says, "this cultural knowledge that is assumed to be held by members of the culture is in reality only a dynamically

evolving, negotiated interaction of individual interpretations, transformations and constructions" (p. 24).

Language and how we use it gives us a tool for understanding other's minds. It is a key way of representing experience. Britton (1977) states, "We construct a representation of the world as we experience it, and from this representation, this cumulative record of our own past, we generate expectations concerning the future; expectations which as moment by moment the future becomes the present, enable us to interpret the present" (p. 39). An event or experience takes place and is gone - it is the representation that lasts and accumulates and undergoes modification. Sharing experiences is impossible as each individual will be central in his/her own understanding of the experience. Therefore, for us to understand one another we must share our world through story, metaphor, symbol or other forms of representation. Sharing through these forms of representations opens up the world of possibilities, generating multiple perspectives and hypotheses.

Bruner (1986) said, "Language can never be neutral...Language necessarily imposes a perspective in which things are viewed and a stance toward what we view...The message itself may create the reality that the message embodies and predispose those who hear it to think about it in a particular mode" (pp. 121, 122).

Language not only transmits meaning across generations who share common concepts, it creates or constitutes knowledge or "reality". It is through language that meanings and concepts are reproduced and made enduring, and it is also through language that such meanings and concepts are modified or replaced, in response to

social change. It is both a mode of communication and a medium for representing the world about which it is communicating.

The Nature of Reality in the Constructivist Perspective

Bruner (1986) believes we construct many realities from differing intentions. He believes we know the world in different ways, from different stances and each of the ways in which we know it produces different structures or representations or "realities".

He speaks of two modes of cognitive functioning that we use to construct reality; the paradigmatic or logico-scientific and the narrative. "The paradigmatic mode leads to good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument and empirical discovery guided by reasoned hypothesis...The narrative mode deals in human or human-like intention and action and when applied leads to stories, drama and believable human accounts" (pp. 11-13).

The two modes begin at a common origin, but diverge and specialize, with different aims in mind where world making is concerned. The paradigmatic model attempts to make a world that remains unchanging or testable across human intentions while the humanist deals with the world as it changes with the position and stance of the viewer.

Historically, we have tended to emphasis the logico-scientific mode over the narrative as a way of knowing because it is testable. This also assumes that there is an objective world awaiting discovery. However, not much of our experience is of this order. Bruner sees value in using both cognitive modes as a way of knowing.

Feldman (1978) cites Berger and Luckman who believe that reality is socially constructed; that is, it is constructed by each individual anew by the use of a tool that carries with it the social and conventional knowledge of his culture. This knowledge is expressed through language in the form of rules, the style and use of language, the selection of categories deemed appropriate for classifying different behaviors and the forms of address which communicate and reproduce the relations between persons of differing ranks and roles.

The stance one assumes or the lens through which an individual processes experience will determine the constructions and "reality" of a particular situation. By changing stances or lenses, "reality" is altered, creating multiple perspectives and "realities".

Bruner (1986) speaks of Goodman's view of reality. Goodman believed there was no real world that existed independently of human mental activity. He postulated that the world is a product of minds whose symbolic procedures construct the world by interpreting, organizing and transforming prior world views, thereby constructing new symbols.

Educational Implications

Bruner (1986) sees education as playing a key role in the negotiating of meaning. "Education is (or should be) one of the principal forums for performing this function...Education should partake of the spirit of a forum, of negotiation, of the recreating of meaning" (p. 123).

Each of the scholars and theorists mentioned above addressed the importance of experience; whether it be formative in the construction and reconstruction of schemata or personal constructs, or instructive in our understanding of our social surroundings and culture.

Dewey (1963) speaks of the relationship between actual experience and education. He believed that all genuine education comes about through experience but not all experiences are educational. Some experiences are mis-educative if they have the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of future experience.

If I believe a child is instrumental in the creation of his or her own reality, based upon experiences negotiated and understood within a social-cultural context, then I must be cognizant of these implications for my classroom. Constructivism, a theory about knowledge and learning has implications for how I respond to students. I must understand that learning is

> "a process of struggling with the conflict between existing models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human meaning-making venture with culturally developed tools and symbols, and further negotiating such meaning through co-operative social activity, discourse, and debate" (Fosnot, 1996, p. ix).

Fosnot maintains that learning does not result from development, it is development. She explains that teachers who profess to be constructivists will provide an environment in which students will need to look for answers to their own questions and organize and categorize information in a way that makes sense to them. Students should be given the opportunity to reflect upon experiences and information and represent them in ways that are meaningful to them, whether through art, drama, music, language, mathematical symbol systems or other means. Then, learning will

happen as students dialogue together, sharing expertise, questions and concerns. Errors in this environment will be valued as opportunities to determine the thinking of the individual as well as opportunity for exploration of numerous possibilities and alternate interpretations.

Student Achievement

The Edmonton Public School District within Alberta defines achievement as the "demonstration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes students are expected to learn at a specific grade level" (1995). The knowledge, skills and attitudes demonstrated by the students must be assessed, evaluated and reported to parents. Therefore, the topics addressed within the section entitled Student Achievement are as follows: (a) assessment and evaluation, (b) the report card, and (c) report card grades. Key studies regarding students' constructions and perceptions of report cards will also be examined.

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment is the task of gathering information about a student's performance through informal and formal means (Aker, 1995; Anderson & Bachor, 1993). A document "Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada" suggests that these strategies and techniques for gathering information about a student's performance include, but are not limited to, observations, text- and curriculum-embedded questions and tests, paper-and-pencil tests, oral questioning,

benchmarks or reference sets, interview, peer- and self-assessment, standardized criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests, performance assessments, writing samples, exhibitions, portfolio assessment, and project and product assessments. Airasian (1996) adds that the information gathered must be synthesized and interpreted to aid classroom decision making. He states that assessment includes information gathered about pupils, instruction and classroom climate. Stiggins (1997) maintains that assessment information is the essential fuel that powers the learning system for the students. Assessment strategies must remain contextually embedded within the curriculum and the policies of the district, and suited to the backgrounds and prior experiences of the students (Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada, 1993).

A search of the literature shows that the main purposes of assessment are:

1. to bring closure to a unit of work (Aker, 1995),
2. to maintain control in the classroom (Aker,1995; Airasian, 1996),
3. to reward or punish students for learning or not learning (Aker, 1995; Airasian, 1996; Holmes, 1993),
4. to diagnose student problems (Airasian, 1996),
5. to judge academic learning and progress (Airasian, 1996),
6. to place pupils, classify and certify (Airasian, 1996; Holmes, 1993, Choate, Enright, Miller, Potect, Rakes, 1995), and
7. to plan and conduct instruction (Airasian, 1996; Choate et al 1992).

Each school district within the province of Alberta develops its own assessment procedures which detail purposes of assessment. An administrative regulation (1991) of the district in which this study is located states,

> "Procedures used in the assessment of student achievement and growth shall:
> 1. provide valid and reliable information to students, parents or guardians about student growth;
> 2. provide the public with school and district achievement and growth information;
> 3. provide realistic and challenging expectations for every student;
> 4. promote student involvement in goal setting, planning and self-evaluation;
> 5. determine the effectiveness of instruction; and
> 6. provide the student with information which may be required by other educational institutions or an employer" (p. 1)

More than one assessment method should be used to ensure comprehensive and consistent indications of student performance. Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada (1993) elaborates,

> To obtain a more complete picture or profile of a student's knowledge, skills, attitudes, or behaviors, and to discern consistent patterns and trends, more than one assessment method should be used. Student knowledge might be assessed using completion items; process or reasoning skills might be assessed by observing performance on a relevant task; evaluation skills might be assessed by reflecting upon the discussion with a student about what materials to include in a portfolio. Self-assessment may help to clarify and add meaning to the assessment of a written communication, science project, piece of art work, or an attitude. Use of more than one method will also help minimize inconsistency brought about by different sources of measurement error, for example, poor performance because of an off-day; lack of agreement among items included in a test, rating scale, or questionnaire; lack of agreement among observers; instability across time (p. 6).

Assessments must be valid and reliable. Validity is the judgment you make after considering evidence from all relevant sources. The concept of validity refers to

the ways in which we interpret and use the assessment results and not to the assessment procedure itself (Nitko,1996). He cites Messick (1989b, 1994a) who says, "The interpretations (meanings) you give to your students' assessment results are valid only to the degree that you can point to the evidence that supports their appropriateness and correctness" (p. 37). To enhance validity, assessment methods should be in harmony with the instructional objectives to which they are referenced (Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada, 1993).

Reliability refers to the consistency of assessment results. Nitko (1996) states, "Reliability, then is the degree to which student's assessment results are the same when

1. they complete the same task(s) on two different occasions,
2. they complete different but equivalent tasks on the same/different occasions,
3. two or more teachers mark their performance on the same task" (p. 62).

Although many individuals use the terms assessment and evaluation interchangeably, these terms have different meanings. Evaluation has to do with passing judgment -- to find numerical expression for -- according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary (9th ed.,1995). It is the process by which a teacher makes sense of all information collected about a student during the assessment process, determining whether specific content, skills or behavioral objectives have been achieved. Evaluation can be formative or summative. Formative evaluation is judging the quality of a student's achievement of a learning target while the student is still in the process of learning it; summative evaluation occurs after the instructional process is complete.

Giving letter grades on report cards is one example of reporting summative evaluation of a student's learning during the preceding marking period (Nitko, 1996). For the purpose of this study, I will be using the term evaluation to mean summative evaluation.

The process of assessing and evaluating students, and subsequently reporting that evaluation to parents and students is guided by provincial government policy. Alberta Education develops and mandates educational policies and directives for the Province of Alberta, but believes that the primary responsibility for evaluation rests with the school and school district personnel. According to Section 13 of the School Act (1996) "A teacher while providing instruction or supervision must...(e) regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students, the student's parents and the board." Section 15 or the same Act requires principals to act in a similar manner. "A principal of a school must..."(g) supervise the evaluation and advancement of students." However, Alberta Education will "define acceptable and excellence standards of student achievement" (Guide to Education, 1994, p. Al-3). Mandated also is the inclusion of identifying student progress relative to the grade levels of curriculum. This information must be provided to students and parents and be part of the student's continuing record of progress.

According to The Student Evaluation Regulation A.R. 40/89 (Alberta Education, 1996) the procedures for this are as follows:

1. The primary responsibility for the continuing evaluation of student achievement lies with each school authority/district and its teachers.

2. Each school authority/district shall develop, keep current and implement written student evaluation policy and procedures consistent with provincial policy, regulations, and procedures.

3. Student evaluation policy shall provide for:

   (a) accurate, fair and equitable student evaluation

   (b) the student's right of appeal and procedures for appeal

   (c) the role of the student and the teacher in evaluations

   (d) the use of evaluation information for the improvement of the quality of educational programs, and

   (e) timely communication of evaluation information to students, parents and school councils.

The procedure for communicating evaluation information is at the discretion of each school district. One of the Administrative Regulations (1995) of Edmonton Public Schools states,

> "Each school shall establish at least three regular reporting periods per school year. A written progress report shall be provided for each reporting period....Information about the grade level of achievement and how well the student is demonstrating grade level expectations shall be reported in the written progress report....The report card shall contain...information about quality of performance compared to curriculum standards and reported by letter grades, percentages or descriptors as follows:

Letter Grades	Percentage	Descriptors
A	80-100%	Work meets standard of excellence
B	65-79%	Work meets acceptable standard
C	50-64%	Work meets acceptable standard
D*	0-49%	Work does not meet acceptable standard
*F to be used at high school level		

This school division advocates keeping achievement, and attitude or effort separated in its reporting procedures.

The Report Card

Traditionally the method used for communicating student evaluation to all stakeholders e.g. parents, students, administrators and teachers, has been a written report card with a numerical or letter scale symbolizing student achievement and growth. In elementary school, the report card is seen as the central, most widely and seriously read communication to the home about the child's school progress (Shedlin, 1988).

The literature shows that this document attempts to satisfy a variety of audiences and serve many functions. Anderson and Wendel (1988), Mehring, Parks, Walter, Banilowski (1991) and Afflerbach and Johnston (1993) state the report card's main function is to give students and families information about a student's progress toward educational goals. Other purposes stated are to change behavior and motivate students (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1993), provide incentive for greater effort (Mehring et al; 1991) and provide information that students can use for self-evaluation (Guskey, 1994). The report card is also used to demonstrate accountability, motivate and direct teachers (Afflerbach & Johnston, 1993). In addition, the grades on the report cards are also used for administrative purposes - as a basis for honors, promotion, graduation, probation, and other selection, retention and sorting functions (Mehring et al; 1991; Seeley, 1994).

Looking at the variety of purposes of and uses for report cards, it is not difficult to understand why teachers may find report card writing a daunting task. There is the added frustration of not being particularly clear about the nature of the report card's audience. Compounding this, is the fact that virtually everyone involved with report cards (e.g. teachers, administrators, students and parents) view them negatively (Shedlin, 1988). The document, "Principles for Fair Student Assessment Practices for Education in Canada" (1993) advocates that report cards are more likely to serve many functions and those functions are less likely to be confused if they are guided by a written rationale policy sensitive to these different needs. "This policy should be developed by teachers, school administrators, and other jurisdictional personnel in consultation with representatives of the audiences entitled to receive a

report of summary comments and grades" (p. 10). Anderson and Wendel (1988) agree and add that the policy should be reviewed annually and formally evaluated for worth and relevance at least every three years.

Report Card Grades

An added concern for teachers is how information is presented on the report card. Historically, information from assessment has been synthesized into a letter or number symbol or grade. Grading is the process of abstracting a great deal of information into a single symbol for ease of communication (Stiggins, 1997). Robinson and Craver (1989) maintain the effectiveness of a symbolic system is found in the ability to communicate effectively and consistently.

But does a single grade communicate effectively and consistently the learning of a child? Stiggins (1997) says, "It is interesting to speculate on what the interpretability of a single letter grade is when we don't know 1) which element (achievement, aptitude, effort and attitude) the grader deemed important, 2) how they defined each, 3) how or how well they assessed each, and 4) what weight they gave each factor in grade computation" (p. 412).

Evans and Engleberg (1988), Mehring et al. (1991), and Stiggins (1997) looked at the characteristics of achievement, aptitude (ability), effort and attitude and discussed the pros and cons of including these in determining grades. Stiggins (1997) maintained there is no place for aptitude, effort and attitude in determining achievement results. Anderson and Wendell (1988) agree, "..evaluation of student abilities, efforts, personalities, behavior and attendance should not be reflected in

grades designed to assess academic achievement. When grade determination includes factors such as effort, compliance with rules and attendance, in addition to academic achievement, grades lose meaning" (p. 37).

Mehring et al (1991) found an issue of variability from one teacher to another in assigning grades, even when using a common grading system. Teachers felt grades put pressure on students, did not describe the students' progress and were arbitrary because they depend on teacher expectations (Hall, 1990). Teachers frequently find grading a source of uncertainty, frustration and ambiguity (Kain, 1996). He states,

> One area generally presumed to be within the purview of autonomous teachers is the practice of grading. Although there is evidence of some district and building-level grading policies, which are sometimes constructed by groups of teachers, teachers appear to maintain a sense of privacy about their own grading practices, guarding these practices with the same passion with which one might guard an unedited diary or what Thomas calls sacred ground. Teachers tend to make assumptions and conform to implicit rules and standards, but tend not to discuss grading, even though it is a source of dissatisfaction with their work (p. 569).

I began to wonder, are students also experiencing a sense of confusion and frustration with respect to grades and how achievement is reported?

Students' Constructions of Report Cards

There are very few studies of elementary student's perceptions or constructions about the report card. A search of ERIC for 1984-1997 resulted in 120 articles pertaining to report cards. When the search was narrowed by adding the descriptor, "elementary education", 38 listings were found. Only three of these listings involved students' constructions/perceptions of the report card.

A second search of ERIC for the same years using "evaluation" as the key word netted 47 399 listings. By narrowing the search to evaluation in elementary settings, the number of listings was reduced to 4 689. Adding a third descriptor, "report card", narrowed the search to 25 listings and when a fourth descriptor, "student perceptions" was added only one listing emerged. This was a study by Anderson and Bachor (1993) entitled, "Assessment Practices in the Elementary Classroom: Perspectives of Shareholders."

This study was intended to explore the assessment practices being used in elementary classrooms and perspectives of the people who were directly affected by them: students, parents, teachers and administrators. It was discovered that teachers of younger students, grades one to three, used anecdotal reporting while teachers of older students, grades four through seven, used letter grades. Most students found anecdotal reporting misleading because it was always positive and did not really let the students know how they were doing in a comprehensive sense.

Anderson and Bachor discovered that the students' understanding of the purpose of the report card was to "describe how we are doing in subject matter areas and let your parents know how you are doing and the things you should work on." The primary students, grades one to three, expressed some nervousness about their report card while at the intermediate level, grades four through seven, tests were seen as the main contributor to the report card. Most report cards were linked with a conference between parents, teacher and student.

Evans and Engelberg (1988) studied Student Perceptions of School Grading with students from grades four through eleven. They discovered a developmental

progression in the acquisition of grading concepts and that attitudes about grades followed a developmental course. Dissatisfaction and cynicism with grading practices increased with age as did ratings of the importance of grades. Younger students and low achievers saw grades as more influenced by external and uncontrollable factors while high achievers and older students endorsed internal and controllable factors. The one thing that all students agreed upon was that getting good grades is the most important thing about school.

Calhoun's (1986) research focused on high school students. She discovered two categories emerged from her interviews which centered around the messages students received from report card grades and the feelings students associated with report card grades.

Messages associated with report card grades:

1. grades tell how much a student has learned,
2. grades tell how hard a student has tried, and
3. other factors (cheating, cramming for a test, 'natural talent') contribute to grades.

Feelings associated with report card grades:

1. some students worry about grades,
2. generally, students think teachers are fair in grading, and
3. a student's ability should be taken into account when the teacher gives grades.

Anderson (1990) studied the impact of the report card on children's self-esteem. She investigated the question of whether academic feedback in the form of

the report card would have an effect on the child's self-esteem. She studied 40 children in grade six and 46 children in grade three. She found that a child's grades were not significantly related to changes in scholastic self-esteem. The self-esteem of students in grade three was positively associated with parental reactions to the report card. For students in grade six, the parent's feelings of happiness or dissatisfaction seemed to have the opposite effect on the child's self-esteem.

Summary

Two major fields of literature were reviewed. The first was constructivism, which provided the theoretical framework for how children (students) know and learn and the second dealt with the processes of assessing, evaluating and reporting student achievement.

Knowing and learning according to constructivists, are the results of individual cognitive processes, a social-historical process or a cultural process. These processes begin with a child's experience. The experiences are formative in the construction and reconstruction of schemata or personal constructs and instructive in students' understanding of their social surroundings and culture.

Assessment and evaluation are processes by which judgments are made about students' achievement. These judgments are synthesized into a letter grade and then communicated to parents through the report card. The provincial government and school districts set standards for assessing, evaluating and reporting student achievement.

It is through the experience of receiving a report card, that a student will begin to make personal meaning of the assessment, evaluation and reporting process.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore selected elementary school students' constructions regarding their report card with a focus on their final report card. The intent of the study was to provide a rich description of the experiences that students had with the report card and the resulting personal constructions of its importance and significance. I believed that each student would develop unique constructions regarding the report card as a result of the interaction between his or her school and home experiences. Therefore, it was important that the research paradigm chosen for this study allow for multiple views of reality and depth of information. Therefore, a naturalistic, interpretive paradigm was chosen.

Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning -- how people make sense of their lives, experiences and their structures of the world (Merriam, 1988 cited in Creswell, 1994). "The researcher is bent on understanding, in considerable detail, how people such as teachers, principals, and students think and how they came to develop the perspectives they hold....They are concerned as well with understanding behavior from the subject's own frame of reference" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p.2).

There are two major techniques used in collecting data in this paradigm - observation and interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). They state that interviewing is a basic mode of inquiry.

> The interview situation usually permits much greater depth than the other methods of collecting research data....The skilled interviewer through the careful motivation of the subject and maintenance of rapport, can obtain information that the subject would probably not reveal under any other circumstances. (Borg & Gall, 1989, pp. 446-447)

"The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution or process is through the experience of the individual people...If the researcher's goal is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary...avenue of inquiry" (Seidman, 1991, p. 4).

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews which would allow them -- the interviews -- to be guided in part by the responses of the students.

Definition of Terms

For this study, it is important to be aware of the definitions of the following educational terms as they pertain to participant selection.

Special Needs (Coded): These are students who may demonstrate cognitive delays in learning. They are generally functioning below the 5th percentile as indicated by standardized tests in at least three areas: reading, vocabulary or comprehension, math, computation or problem solving and spelling. These students are usually accommodated in a classroom with students in the regular program. Occasionally, if they have very specialized needs, they will be accommodated in a special class at a specific school.

Core Subjects: The four core subject areas I am using as a basis for student selection are as follows: Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. These are

four of the required subject areas in a student's program as outlined by Alberta Education.

Regular Program: This follows the graded program of studies and is not formally modified to accommodate student differences.

The Site and the Participants

I chose to interview students in a school community where I was known, at least by name, because of the sensitive nature and confidential aspect of the report card. I felt that there needed to be for students, parents, and teachers alike, an element of trust in me as a professional that would carry over into my role as a researcher. For the purpose of this study, I will use the pseudonym Riverside, when referring to the school in which the study was conducted.

Riverside School is an elementary school in a large urban area of Alberta. It houses approximately 400 students Kindergarten to grade six. The students are from many cultures and the area in which the school is located is comprised of single family dwellings with a few apartment buildings. The only children bussed to Riverside School are the students in the special need classrooms. The population is relatively stable with few transfers in and out during the year.

I intended to work with three different grade levels of elementary students in order to understand student constructions of the report card from various age groups. I was especially interested in the constructions of the grade one students as this would be their first final report card. I also wanted to explore the constructions of the grade six students who had been through the process many times. It was presumed that their

previous experience with report cards would make their constructions different from the grade one students. I felt the gap between grade one and grade six was too broad and so I decided to include grade three students as well. I hoped to interview six students with varying achievement results from each grade level -- two high achievers, two average achievers and two low achievers -- in order to ascertain whether achievement results would affect student constructions. I also preferred that one female and one male at each achievement level be selected to determine if there were gender differences in their constructions.

I visited Riverside School in April in order to share my research proposal with the principal. The principal was interested in the topic and gave permission for me to conduct the research. I asked to work with one teacher at each of the three grade levels. The principal selected three teachers who I could contact. Teachers selected taught their students in the four core subject areas and had expressed interest in participating in the study.

I met with the selected teachers in early May, in order to share my proposed study. The teachers were given a copy of the proposal to read and expressed interest in the topic. They all agreed to participate in the study. Involvement of the teachers was kept to a minimum -- as I know how frustrating extra demands on a teacher's time can be, especially at the end of the year.

The teachers were asked to select six students from each of their classrooms based on the following criteria. First, all selected pupils had to be from the "regular program", which meant no "coded" or "special needs" students were included. By the time students are coded, they are usually two to three years behind their peers in the

academic program, while remaining, in most cases, in age appropriate classrooms. They have usually experienced frustration with and failure in the academic program. This failure is generally communicated to parents by the report card. I did not want these students to have to reflect upon the report card and relive what I believe might have been or is a painful experience for them. Second, in addition to being part of the "regular program," there were to be two students who had achieved the standard of excellence in three out of four core subject areas on their two previous report cards in November and March. Third, there were also to be two students who had achieved an acceptable standard and two students who were below the acceptable standard. Fourth, of the two students chosen at each achievement level, one was to be male, the other female. In order to avoid labeling the students the teachers were to give me the names of the six students in random order. However, I was aware of the achievement level of the grade six students because I had previously worked with some of them.

All three teachers were asked to identify a seventh student with whom I could pilot my interview questions. Each teacher was given a letter of information as well as a permission form to be sent to the parents or guardians of the chosen students. The letters guaranteed anonymity of the students through the use of pseudonyms and the choice of withdrawing at any time from the study. A copy of this letter can be found in Appendix A.

There was some difficulty with the selection process, based on the above criteria. The criteria were too limiting in terms of achievement level. Apart from the special needs or "coded" students, there were no students at grade one and three that could be identified as low achievers (i.e. below the acceptable standard) by the report

card. Therefore, I asked the grade one and three teachers simply to select two children, one male and one female, who were experiencing the most difficulty with the academic expectations, but not coded. This meant that most of the children selected in grades one and three met the acceptable standard or the standard of excellence. However, the grade six teacher was able to select students at each of the three levels although the low achievers selected were not below the acceptable standard in three out of four core subject areas. The two selected students were below the acceptable standard in at least one core subject area.

Seventeen out of eighteen students selected chose to participate in the study and returned their permission forms. The eighteenth student was from a family in which English was their second language. The teacher and I both assumed that the information letter with the accompanying permission slip was neither read nor understood and therefore, never returned. Because of this, five, rather than six students in grade one were interviewed.

Data Collection

I conducted 34 individual, semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audiotaped. Students were individually engaged in conversation twice in a semi-structured interview format; first in May to discuss general comments and feelings about the report card and secondly, at the end of June or beginning of July when their final report card was discussed. In addition, I kept field notes, in which I jotted my impressions of the comfort of the student with the interview process and the questions

being asked. I also kept track of novel student constructions gained in one interview that I then used to question other students about.

The first interviews were held at Riverside School in May, 1997. They ranged in time from 20 to 45 minutes. During this initial interview or conversation, I spent some time getting to know each student; their likes, dislikes, hobbies, and activities they engaged in out of school, as well as general feelings and thoughts about report cards were addressed. Sample interview questions can be found in Appendix B. I tried to ask some similar questions of each student for consistency, but our conversations digressed according to individual interests, understandings, and experiences. After each initial interview, I spent five to ten minutes jotting down initial impressions of the student and the interview.

For the majority of the students, our second interview or conversation took place at Riverside School on June 27, the day after the report cards had been received. By having our conversations so soon after receiving their report cards, their responses were based upon a very recent experience and had not been faded by time. The interviews were 20 to 30 minutes long. The main purpose for this interview was to discuss each student's report card, and students were asked to bring a copy of the report card to the interview. There is a sample report card in Appendix C. I felt that some students might accidentally or purposefully forget their copy, so I had the teachers make me copies of each interviewed student's report card (these copies will be returned to the students or their parents upon completion of the thesis). About half of the students came to the interview with their report card. There did not appear to be a correlation between the ones that forgot and low achievement level, as I

previously expected. Since I could not interview all of the students on one day, I met with one student on Saturday, June 28 and spoke with the remaining students in their homes the following Wednesday, July 2, 1997.

Each interview or conversation was slightly different as the student's individual constructions and experiences were unearthed. This meant that no two students were asked exactly the same questions in the same order. My understandings of stated opinions, thoughts, and feelings were paramount and so questions were asked that probed more deeply into particular areas raised by the children. The questions themselves changed as students would bring up new ideas. I then tried to incorporate those ideas into further conversations to see if other students had similar constructions. This was very difficult as I did not want to lead the students into particular responses. Some questions were asked at both interviews to check for consistency of student response.

As in the procedure for the initial interview, field notes were kept and written in the five to ten minutes between interviews. These notes contained my impressions about the students' reactions to their report card and other factors that might have affected the interviews. An example of an interview that was affected by external factors occurred with a grade one student. Her family was on their way to Calgary and stopped to have the interview on the way. I felt she was not terribly interested in speaking with me because of the trip and responded to nearly every question with "I don't know."

Pilot Study

Before I began my formal research, I spent time in early March speaking with my niece, age 10 and my nephew, age 9, about their report cards. They had just received their third report card of the year. During our conversation, I listened to what they found interesting, informative, or puzzling about the report card. Their reactions and responses to the marks and comments on the report card helped to shape my interview questions.

Three additional students at grades one, three, and six were selected by the teachers in Riverside School to participate in a pilot study. I met individually in early May with two of these students from grades one and three. Our interview was held at the school and lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. The grade six student selected was a special needs student and I chose not to interview him. This pilot study was used to refine the questions asked and to practice my interviewing techniques. I believe interviewing is a skill that must be practiced before one becomes proficient. Therefore, it was important for me to practice this skill before I began my formal data collection. The pilot study was also beneficial for determining the logistics of each interview or conversation -- timing needed and use of technology. It was found that for the grade one students, 30 minutes was long enough. Any longer and they would lose interest. The grade three and six students usually needed between 30 and 45 minutes to share everything they had to say. As each interview was tape recorded, the pilot study allowed me to be aware of the limitations of my tape recorder. Children are self-conscious when being taped and tend to speak more quietly than usual. The student responses of the first student interviewed could not be heard on the tape and

so it was necessary for me to purchase a better tape recorder with a microphone. Information gathered from these students in the pilot study was not incorporated into the body of findings presented in Chapter Four.

Report Card at Riverside School

Report cards are completed three times during the school year. Riverside School sends them to the parents in November, March and June. The first two report cards are followed by a parent-student-teacher conference.

The report cards used in Riverside School are computer generated. A sample of the report card is in Appendix C. The folder surrounding the report card details the purpose of reporting student progress, a description of the curriculum, school philosophy and the school code of conduct. A copy of the folder is in Appendix D.

The final report card has three major sections. The first section is entitled Personal Development. It consists of fourteen generic comments which detail students' work habits and behavior. Beside each statement is a "N" for Needs Improvement, "S" for Satisfactory and "E" for Excellent. These letters are used by the teacher to evaluate the behaviors or attitudes she or he sees demonstrated by the student throughout the reporting term. Underneath is a space in which the teacher can type specific comments pertinent to each student. This space can be enlarged as needed.

The second section consists of the specific subject areas. Each subject has a space in which to name the teacher responsible for teaching that subject, along with three small boxes. One is for the Performance mark (e.g. A, B, C, or D), another for

the Effort mark (e.g. E, S, N) and the last is labeled Grade Level of Achievement. Teachers can choose from pre-written curricular comments within the computer program or generate their own. Again, the space for comments is not limited. Some teachers may chose to list the topics of study and put comments underneath, others may be most comfortable with comments only.

The third section, containing the recommendation for grade level placement, is found only on the final report card. This section of the report card must be handwritten. Every report card is signed by the homeroom teacher and the principal.

Data Analysis

All 34 interviews were audiotaped and transcribed within two days of the interview. This was important so I could recall specific nuances such as head motions signifying "yes" or "no" responses. My first set of field notes was read after all initial interviews were completed. Emerging themes and surprises were listed. However, in-depth analysis of the interview data was avoided until all interviews were completed and transcribed. Seidman (1991) encourages this, stating,

> The process of working with excerpts from participants' interviews, seeking connections among them, and building interpretative categories is demanding and involves risks. The danger is that the researcher will try to force the excerpts into categories, and the categories into themes that he or she already has in mind, rather than let them develop from the experience of the participants as represented in the interviews (p. 101).

He goes on to suggest questions to ask as data are being analyzed. They are as follows:

> What connections are there among the experiences of participants you interview? What do you understand now that you did not understand before you began the interviews? What surprises have there been? What

> confirmation of previous instincts? How have your interviews been consistent with literature? Inconsistent? How have they gone beyond? (p. 102).

As I searched for emerging themes, I went back to the transcriptions many, many times. General categories were noted and color coded. These responses were documented and examined for age or grade, ability, and gender similarities and differences.

Each category was noted and examined for relationships in other categories. Eventually three main themes emerged with several sub-themes in each. The themes were (a) Mystery - A Surprise Package, (b) Monitoring, and (c) Marks.

After reading, re-reading, color-coding, and analyzing, I still felt I was missing something. Themes were emerging, but I felt that the students were losing their individuality and were being treated as part of a group. It was very important that I honor each student's constructions and so another method of data analysis was explored. Each student transcript from May and June was examined by deleting my questions. This meant I could examine his or her responses without being confined by the questions asked. These responses were analyzed for feeling tone, categories and themes. I was particularly interested when a similar response occurred many times. An example of this was evident in the responses of one grade six student. He mentioned his concern with failing at least seven times. This was in response to many different questions and was obviously of paramount importance to him. As the categories were emerging and the stories being written, I referred back to the original transcriptions to make sure their words were not being used out of context.

Then using the categories that emerged from the responses, personal stories were written about each student, using their language as much as possible. This allowed for the emergence of individual constructions that might have otherwise been missed.

Limitations

This study was limited to the constructions or perceptions of students in one elementary school in Alberta, therefore the results cannot be generalized to other locations. However, this study's transferability to other settings was enhanced due to the fact that multiple participants were interviewed, field notes were kept and findings were connected with current literature. Marshall and Rossman (1989) state, "Designing a study in which multiple cases are used, multiple informants or more than one data gathering technique can greatly strengthen the study's usefulness for other settings" (p. 146). Participation was voluntary. Because of the sensitive nature of this study, I choose to work in an area where I knew some of the students and was aware of their background histories.

Delimitations

The students in this study were selected from the regular program in Grades One, Three and Six. Special needs or coded students were not selected. Therefore, the constructions or perceptions of the students who experienced "formally recognized" difficulties with achievement in school were eliminated from this study.

Chapter Four

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

Bonnie's Story

Bonnie uses the phrase - "straight A student" - to describe herself. She looks forward to receiving her report card and uses words like joyful, good and happy when describing her feelings about the report card. However, these feelings are associated with the good marks she has always experienced.

Even though Bonnie has a history of receiving good marks, she isn't sure what her grades might be on her final report card. She uses words like "I hope" or "probably". She does not consider the "A" she receives to be her ultimate goal. She assumes that she can still improve even though she has "A's".

Bonnie receives rewards from her parents for having straight "A's" on her report card. She is taken to the store and can choose something that she wants. She has her eye on a CD player.

Her secret for success is "working her hardest, not spending time on chitter-chatter, checking over her work and taking her time."

On the rare occasion when she has received a "B", she says it was because her answers probably weren't good enough.

For Bonnie, report cards tell her parents "how she's doing, what she's been doing and what we've learned" (Grade Three Student).

The purpose of this study was to explore elementary school students' constructions of the report card with an emphasis on their final report cards. Although students' individual constructions were individualistic by their very nature, there were three major themes that emerged. Each theme consisted of several sub-themes which were interrelated and interconnected. It was difficult at times to categorize a sub-theme as it could fit under several themes. This was understandable as students' constructions in one area seemed to impact constructions in another area. And so a web of understanding was woven. I will discuss the three themes separately. They are as follows: Mystery - A Surprise Package, Monitoring and Marks.

As well as identifying the three main themes within the students' constructions, there was a feeling that I had when speaking with the children. It was a feeling that the children were wanting to give me the answers that they thought I wanted to hear. It was overt in only one case when a student asked me, "What do you want me to say?" otherwise only a strong feeling on my part. "I felt like she was trying to give me answers I wanted to hear - even though I told her there weren't any right or wrong answers" (Field notes, May 12, 1997). Another student asked me at the end of our first conversation, "What do you think about report cards?" I jotted in my field notes of May 29, 1997, "I wonder if he really wanted to know or was checking to see if he gave me the right answers." This shouldn't be surprising as I know children want to please. I felt I wasn't coming to our interviews/conversations in the role teacher/evaluator, but the students saw it differently.

At other times, the students seemed to change their opinions when I probed further or questioned a response.

Theme One: Mystery (A Surprise Package)

The first theme describing one aspect of students' constructions of the report card dealt with its mysterious nature. This theme became evident very early on in the interviews with the students as they seemed to have no idea what would be on their final report card either in terms of marks or comments. Three sub-themes emerged from the mysterious nature of the report card: (a) student emotions surrounding the report card, (b) predictability of marks and (c) confusion about terminology used on the report card.

Student Emotions Surrounding the Report Card

The emotions the majority of students expressed before they received their final report card reflected their uncertainty about the eventual contents on the report card.

The students expressed emotions of hope, joy, anger, frustration, and nervousness. The grade one students used hopeful statements such as "I hope mine is good" and "I hope I get an A." There was also some fear expressed, "Scared, 'cause if I get a bad mark, it means something bad to me." The grade one teacher chose to report the students' progress using written comments and effort marks on the first two report cards distributed in November and March. Achievement marks were not given on these report cards. I found it very interesting that several grade one students

mentioned "A's", "B's", "C's" and "D's" even though they had no prior personal experience receiving achievement marks. I assumed they may have older brothers and sisters who talked about marks or perhaps their parents had discussed marks and told the students which ones were acceptable and which ones were not.

Although the grade three students had two years of experience with a final report card, they still expressed uncertainty about their marks as illustrated by the following statement, "It makes me feel happy 'cause I know how, it's like, I know how my grades are and then I can find out how I'm doing." The ambiguous nature of this student's comment reveals a wondering attitude about the actual comments and marks on the report card. This student says she knows what her grades are, but isn't completely convinced until she has the piece of paper in front of her with her actual grades listed. There is also frustration expressed by another grade three student, "I always think, like when I'm going to get on, on my things, am I going to get a "C" on LA like I usually do, 'cause I'm not good at reading."

All of the grade six students expressed nervousness. "I think about good grades, I think about, I don't know, well a lot of nervous stuff...'cause you, you don't know what you're going to get, like it's suspenseful." "I'm kind of nervous and I don't know for sure, um, like I'm scared what I'm going to get." "Um, well, I get a little nervous like -- Oh no, what if I do bad? -- but usually I do really good, so."

And then there is anger, as exhibited by a grade six student. "A very big put-down... Well, usually because I'm getting bad marks on my report card and I always try to get good marks but at the end of the year, I always get my report card and go - I

did that? - and it gets me all annoyed with myself and so it's just a big put-down on myself."

Regardless of prior experience with report cards, all the students expressed feelings of uncertainty and nervousness. These feelings of uncertainty and nervousness were based in part on the fact that the students were unsure about their marks.

Predictability of Marks

The second sub-theme was the lack of students' ability to correctly predict their marks on their final report card. When asked to predict what would be on their final report card in terms of achievement marks, the grade one students' used words like "hopefully I'll get an "A" or "probably I'll get an "A" or just responded with an "I don't know." Their predictions were like shots in the dark, "Hopefully at least 2 "A's", or 3 or 4 or 5 or all of them" and "Probably a "B"... maybe not. Maybe an "A" will be." None of the grade one students thought they would have any mark lower than a "B".

Perhaps some of the grade one student's difficulty predicting their marks was because they had no prior personal experience with marks.

The grade three students did not express the same degree of uncertainty about the achievement marks on their final report card although one said, "Well, no one can actually know, 'cause no one can actually tell the future." Even though she thought she would probably get straight "A's" and based that prediction on her test results she stated, "...I usually get 100 and on one I got like 95, so I don't know what I'll do". There was a feeling that ultimately, the final responsibility for what was on the report card was out of her hands. Grade three students could be quite specific in their

responses citing different subject areas and the marks they thought they would receive as well as why they would receive them. An example of this is found in the following comments. (For all examples of dialogue, the R refers to the researcher, while the S refers to the student.)

S: "Um..maybe a "B" on Math and I hope I get a "B" on Language Arts 'cause I usually be getting a "C". Maybe an "A" on Music and Phys. Ed... probably a "B" on everything else."

R: Why do you think you'll get an "A" in Music and Phys. Ed?

S: Because...um..Music, it's sort of good and if you sing out good, then you'll probably get an "A". And for Phys. Ed. It's like if you don't really know how to do it, then you'll probably get a "B", but if you know really how to do it, then you'll probably get an "A".

Similarly, the grade six students used expressions such as "I'm hoping", "probably", "maybe", "I think", and one replied, "I'm really not sure" when asked to predict their achievement marks. Some of them backed up their prediction as demonstrated by the following comments.

S: I don't know. I'm doing pretty good on my tests lately so I might get in the "C" or "B's".

R: So if you've been doing well on your tests, does that have any relation to what you get on your report card?

S: Well, some of it does and if like I do good on tests, that will help my mark and if I do good on Math on all the pages we do, that will also help.

Adding to the uncertainty about marks is a sense by grade three and six students that marks are averaged and can be played with by the teacher. As one grade six student responded, "Well, like, sometimes you're, like positive that you'll get a "B" in Social Studies, well then sometimes the teacher will think - Oh well, this person got a 63 twice so I should only give her a "C" if we have 3 tests or something."

Four out of seventeen students were able to correctly predict all of their marks on the final report card. The students who were able to make accurate predictions were the top students at grades three and six. Anderson (1990) found that good students were more accurate in predicting what their grades would be than the poor students. Another grade three student, though not a high achiever, was extremely accurate in her predictions. I felt her accuracy was due to the amount of time spent thinking about her marks and her strengths and weaknesses as reflected on previous report cards. This student always received a "C" in Language Arts and although she desperately wanted a "B", she predicted the "C" on her final report card.

Confusion with Terminology

The majority of students expressed confusion over the terminology and phraseology used on the report card (see Appendix C for sample report card). It was evident across all grade levels, and it was not surprising that confusion and misinterpretation was more evident among grade one students. What was surprising was the students' lack of understanding of terminology such as core subject area names. Examples by two grade one students are as follows.

R: What does it tell me about your Language Arts?

S: Um. I don't know

R: What do you do in Language Arts?

S: Well, I don't even know what Language Arts is. (Student A)

R: What is Language Arts?

S: Long pause....

R: What do you do in Language Arts?

S: Um. Did Art and stuff. (Student B)

Another area of confusion for most students at all grade levels was surrounding the phrases in the Personal Development section of the report card. These phrases described students' work habits and social skills. They were very confusing for most students although the greatest amount of misunderstanding was evident among the grade one students as illustrated by the selections below.

R: You had an S here for **Organizes and uses materials and class time effectively**. What does that mean to you?

S: That I should get up more. I'm kind of lazy.

R: What about some of these other S's. **Completes assignments on time**. What does that mean?

S: Um. That I erase a lot of things and try to make it neater.

R: What about **Attempts all tasks**? Do you know what that means?

S: No

R: (Reading next phrase) **Shows determination to do best work.**

S: No

R: (Reading next phrase) **Participates in large groups.**

S: I'm good in that.

R: What does that mean?

S: That I don't get lost in big groups and I'm quite good staying together in big groups. (Student A)

R: What about **Participates in large groups?**

S: It means that we're doing stuff in large groups with our class.

R: What about **Completes assignments on time?**

S: It means that you got to be at the school on time.

R: What about **Listens attentively?**

S: That means very good. (Student B)

Although the grade three and six students stated they understood what was meant by these phrases, I had a strong feeling that they lacked understanding. This intuitive reaction on my part was based on the fact the students used the same language of the phrase when asked what the phrase meant. They were unable or unwilling to define the phrases by giving examples of expected behaviors. The following two grade six students illustrate this point.

R: What about **Participates in large groups**?

S: Well, that I participate in large groups. Um, that I like, try to do go in big groups as well as doing my work orderly and stuff. (Student A)

R: This says **Organizes and uses materials and class time effectively**. What does that mean?

S: It means that I work good and organized and I use class time effectively.

R: Effectively?

S: Good, well...I (shrugs) (Student B)

The students' constructions seemed to indicate that the report card was a mysterious document. It consisted of marks that could not be predicted and terminology that was not understood. It was not surprising that the predominant emotion expressed by the students was one of nervousness. This finding was consistent with Anderson and Bachor (1993) who found that elementary students indicated some nervousness about the report cards.

What was more surprising was the students' lack of ability to predict their marks on the report card, especially among the grade six students. I assumed that most teachers, especially at the grade six level, involved the students in the assessment and evaluation process wherever possible. Through their involvement, I thought students would know the marks they had earned during a reporting period and be able to predict their marks based on previous accomplishments. "With age, student's

perceptions of their ability becomes more congruent with teacher's perceptions" (Nicholls, cited by Weinstein, 1983, p. 300).

Theme Two: Monitoring

The second theme that emerged from the students' constructions was the assumption that the report card was used as a tool for (a) monitoring students' behavior, and (b) promotion or retention.

The students felt the report card provided this monitoring service for both students and parents. The students in Anderson and Bachor's (1993) study also felt that, "...the purpose of report cards was to let your parents know how you are doing and the things you should work on" (p. 9). The grade one students had a higher proportion of responses that assumed the report cards were for their parents and not themselves. That proportion shifted with the responses from grade three and six students, who felt the report card was for themselves and not parents. Some students even mentioned extended family, such as grandparents. However, the majority of students felt the report card was not to be shared with their peers. No one at the grade one level spoke of sharing and only two students at the grade three level spoke of sharing. One girl spoke of sharing with her friends while a boy said he never showed his report card to any of his friends but sometimes told them his marks. This was a high achieving student. Four students in grade six mentioned sharing; the boys suggested they only shared marks if they were good, while the girls shared regardless.

I had assumed that students who were high achievers would be more likely to share the marks on their report cards. However, this was not the case, and sharing seemed to be more related to gender and age than achievement level. This is the first time gender seemed to influence the students' constructions regarding the report card.

Monitoring Behavior

When asked about the purpose of the report card, many students identified it as a tool or mechanism for monitoring behavior. The majority of comments regarding monitoring of behavior, were made by grade one and three students. They used statements like, "So your Mom and Dad know how you're listening, um...been doing stuff and how many detentions you got" and "Because it tells our parents what we did and how bad we're being and how good we're being and stuff" or "To tell your parents how you're doing in school 'cause your parents can't be there all the time watching - if I'm behaving."

These same students thought the report card gave them personal information about their behavior, particularly if their behavior needed modifying in some way. One grade one student stated, "...to tell you if you need to listen more and um...and listen and stay and don't talk when the teacher's talking." When asked how the teacher decided what goes on the report card, another grade one student responded, "By my behavior, good work and putting up your hand and not calling out and stuff."

Two students in grade six stated that students might behave differently in school if there weren't any report cards. Their reasoning is shown in the following excerpts.

R: If you didn't have report cards, would it make a difference in school, for how you are in school?

S: Yes

R: Explain.

S: Because you probably wouldn't have to work as hard 'cause they wouldn't tell your parents and they...you wouldn't be as respectful. (Student A)

R: Let's say you came next year and the teacher said - There aren't going to be any report cards. Would that affect the way you worked in school?

S: No, not really. (Pause) Well, probably a little. Probably behavior would go down and your working habits would go down because there's no, like, thing to tell your parents how you've been doing. So your parents would never, ever know. (Student B)

It is interesting to note that both of these grade six students were categorized as low to mid-achievers and the comments suggested that there remains a strong reliance upon a external monitoring mechanism to determine how they will act in school situations. In my experience, this need for external direction is more apparent in younger children as older children rely more strongly on internal structures to direct behavior. Older children are usually aware of consequences associated with their actions, and through personal experience are able to make choices that will be positive for them, not only in the short-term, but also the long-term.

Betty's Story

Betty relies on her parents to read the report card to her. She says , "...her parents will read it and say that she's been getting good marks, she's been doing well in school and she's been working with her teacher really hard and that's about it."

Betty thinks she gets good marks for helping the teacher, for listening and not talking when the teacher is talking. She believes that report cards are used to monitor her behavior and will let her parents know if she has had a detention or been late to school.

*She doesn't know what the Personal Development comments mean. For example, when questioned about the phase - **Completes Assignments on time** - she said, "It means you've got to be at the school on time."*

Art is her favorite subject because she can do different crafts, color, use pastels and paint, but she says it is important to make her cutting good and color in the lines. That is trying harder.

The best thing about her report card is that she passed Grade One.

(Grade One Student)

Promotion or Retention

The second construction within the monitoring theme portrayed the report card as a mechanism for monitoring student placement for the following school year. Comments by students at all three grade levels; one student at grade one, three students at grade three, and two students at grade six, addressed the importance of

the report card in advising students and parents about passing into the next grade or repeating the grade. This was not surprising because the final report card is the only report card that indicates the following year's grade placement.

For students who mentioned failure as a possibility, the majority spoke of it as being a parental decision; not a teacher made decision. They stated the teacher may make a recommendation but the parents make the final decision, usually based on the students' marks on the report card. One grade six student explained, "My Dad isn't quite sure if I'm going to Grade Seven yet. He might keep me back. It says I'm going to Grade Seven but he doesn't know if he wants me to go to Grade Seven. See he doesn't think I'm ready yet."

Mike's Story

Report cards play an important function for Mike. They "help you to say if you should go on to the next grade or stay back." This is mentioned at least seven times during our conversations. The marks on his report card also determine whether Mike will spend his summer in summer school.

Mike feels a sense of accomplishment over the improvement between the last two reporting periods. He says, "Well, I did very good from my last one. I improved a lot, my parents are proud of that...I did better. I concentrated more instead of just guessing the things so I could go outside or watch TV; we're no longer allowed to watch TV unless it's the weekend so that helped a bit." He sets goals and tries to accomplish them. He is rewarded for having a good report card by having his favorite food made or attending a concert.

Mike is surrounded by concerned and caring adults - his parents and his neighbor. The neighbor was instrumental in involving Mike with tutoring classes. "He doesn't want me to grow up to be a person who doesn't do...have anything, who's not smart and stuff; he cares for me a lot and his family does too." Dad makes sure Mike is prepared for class. "...like when we have to do a presentation, if my Dad doesn't think it's proper enough, he'll make me do another one 'til he thinks it's good."

It is important to Mike and his parents that he is at the same Grade level of achievement in the subject areas as the rest of the class. He gets all his information about his accomplishments from the marks, he never reads the comments.
(Grade Six Student)

The majority of students felt the report card was a mechanism for monitoring their behavior and progress, eventually being the document that helped parents make the decision about retention, if necessary. The literature supports this construction of monitoring. Anderson and Wendel (1988), Mehring et al. (1991), Afflerbach and Johnson (1993) stated that the report card's main function was to give students and families information about a student's progress toward educational goals. Teachers expect and encourage this monitoring component, using the report card to provide information with which students can set educational goals to be accomplished during the next reporting term.

I think there is an unspoken assumption by teachers that students' behavior should improve as a result of the report card. Afflerbach and Johnson (1993) also found that report cards were used to change student behavior.

Theme Three: Marks

The third and most dominant theme of students' constructions was one of marks. Concern about marks was also expressed in both previous themes of Mystery and Monitoring. Most students felt they were unable to predict their marks and some students talked about marks in relation to passing or failing the year. Anderson and Wendel (1988) state that grades and marks have attained universal status as standard for assessing students, and issuing a single grade, mark, or number rating has become the preferred way to chart and record student progress. This theme will explore student constructions of marks (achievement) in the following areas: (a) who decides the marks, (b) how the marks are determined, (c) the importance of marks and (d) the relationship between marks and learning. Within each sub-theme are several topics which will be addressed separately. For the majority of the time during our conversations, the students used the term marks to refer to achievement, not effort.

Although each report card contains two sets of marks, the effort mark (E, S, N) and the achievement mark (A, B, C, D), many students across all grade levels confused these two marks. (See Appendix C for sample report card). When asked to differentiate between the achievement and effort marks, even the grade six students had difficulty as demonstrated by the following grade six comments.

R: What does that effort mark mean?

S: It means how hard I worked and how much I put into my work.

R: And the achievement marks means...What?

S: Means...(pause)...um...the effort, the effort and how hard I work.

A common misconception across all grade levels seemed to refer to the relationship between the two marks. Some students felt that they were connected. For example, they stated that if a student received a high achievement mark, their effort mark would also be high. The inverse statement would also be true, a low achievement mark would be accompanied by a low effort mark. A grade six student explains in the following comments.

S: Usually your effort mark goes with your achievement mark sometimes.

R: Why do they go together?

S: Well, if like you're not like paying attention or anything you couldn't really be learning much either.

R: So you don't think it would be possible to have an "A" (for Achievement) and a "N" (for Effort)?

S: No, that wouldn't work.

R: Because...

S: Well, because, um...because like, yeah, effort is how much you participate and everything and if you don't really participate and you talk all the time and everything and you don't really learn much and you don't really get a good mark.

R: What if you talk all the time, but you know all the stuff and get high marks on the test?

S: Um... (laughs)...um...I don't know

R: Has that ever happened, do you think?

S: Not really.

Who Decides the Marks?

The first sub-theme that appeared addressed the question of "who decided the marks?" The students felt that various individuals had that responsibility. They mentioned teachers, principal and themselves as being responsible for deciding what marks are on their report card.

All of the grade one students mentioned their teacher, while most of the grade three students and two grade six students mentioned the principal.

All the students in grade one and three, with the exception of one, felt that the teacher was responsible for deciding what marks were on the report card. The student who was the exception explains:

R: Who decides what goes on your report card?

S: Me.

R: Tell me about that.

S: I'm the one who's going to make my Math an "A", and my Music go up, this year I only got a "C". (Grade Three Student)

The majority of students in grade six mentioned that teachers decided but the mid to high achieving students in grade six also spoke of personal responsibility for their marks with statements such as, "I decide 'cause if I want a good report card, I

have to work hard" and "because if you're bad and everything and you don't do good on your tests because you don't study or whatever, then, that's your fault."

The principal was perceived to have dual roles; one of "the boss", making the actual decision about the mark and the other of a monitoring role. One grade three student explains:

R: What does the principal decide?

S: He decides what marks you should get.

R: How does he decide what marks you should get?

S: 'Cause he knows if...where I've been working really hard.

A grade six student elaborates, "The teacher probably would decide what achievement marks you would get, and the effort marks and the comments. All the principal would do is make sure the teacher is making the right decision with the achievement."

How Achievement Marks are Determined

The second sub-theme that emerged was how the achievement marks were determined. The students were divided in their opinions about what criteria was factored into their single mark in each subject area.

> Grading in elementary classes, more than in secondary classes, seemingly reflects inconsistent and variable criteria, including effort, class discussion, student behavior, and proper student attitudes...The arbitrariness of these grading criteria may obscure the meaning of grades and grading practices for younger students (Evans & Engelburg, 1988 p. 49)

The criteria mentioned by students interviewed were as follows: behavior, neatness, having the "right" answer, effort and intelligence.

Behavior

Flowing throughout all the grade levels was the idea that good or bad behavior was the determiner of a good or bad achievement mark. Following are several examples to show how dominant the relationship between behavior and achievement was in the children's constructions. The first two examples are from grade one students.

R: How does your teacher decide what goes on your report card?

S: By my behavior, good work and putting up your hand and not calling out and stuff. (Student A)

R: How about if you wrote your own report card? Would you give yourself the same kind of marks?

S: I don't...Yeah.

R: Why?

S: 'Cause that's the truth.

R: How do you know it's the truth?

S: Because I know how I've been behaving.

R: So these good marks are... they show...

S: Your behavior. (Student B)

Grade six students observed how their behavior affected their marks as noted by one student below.

S: Well, so if they're, like if I'm fooling around and not paying attention and they are, they'll be doing better in the tests and stuff, so I should pay more attention and the people who aren't paying attention, so they can get better grades.

R: Do you think it's possible to not really be paying attention and end up with a good mark?

S: Nope.

It is interesting to note that beyond grade one, the feeling that behavior affects marks is expressed only by low achievers or boys. One lower achieving grade six student made a comment that was very similar to the sentiments expressed by the grade one students, "Most of the report card is behavior and my behavior is talkative this year." This is the second time that gender has seemed to make an impact on the responses.

Student constructions regarding the connection between behavior and its subsequent affect on their marks has been documented in the literature. "Teacher's perceptions of student's behavior can significantly influence their judgments of scholastic performance" (Hills, 1991 cited in Guskey, 1994). Students with behavior problems often have no chance to receive a high grade because their infractions overshadow their performance. These effects are especially pronounced in judgments of boys" (Bennett et al., 1993 cited in Guskey, 1994).

Christy's Story

Christy uses words like happy, sad and mad when asked about report cards. Happy describes how she feels if she gets all "A's", sad and mad are the words used if she doesn't. It is important to Christy to get all "A's" because then her Mom will be happy "cause that means I'm being good." Good marks are the result of good behavior.

She takes full responsibility for her behavior using phrases like "...cause I've been doing really good, 'cause I wasn't doing so well, because I changed and because I know how I've been behaving".

Her first report card was all "E's" but on the second one, "the "N's" and "S's" pushed away some of the "E's." This was due to her behavior "being a little bit badder." (Grade One Student)

Neatness

Gender differences were apparent when discussing neatness as criteron used in determining student marks. The majority of girls across all three grade levels said that neatness will affect your mark. Only one grade three boy mentioned neatness. Guskey (1994) cites Sweedler-Brown who maintains that the neatness of a students' handwriting can significantly affect a teacher's judgment of a student's scholastic performance. Included below are examples from all grade levels to illustrate the prevalence of this belief among students interviewed in this study.

R: What do you mean by work hard?

S: Listen and write stuff properly and stuff. Like we were supposed to write the differences and some same things and we were supposed to write them neatly.

R: What if you write all of the information but it is not very neat?

S: You still get it right but you get a lower mark on your report card. (Grade Three Student)

R: Why do you think you got those bad marks?

S: I don't know, probably because sometimes I end up don't concentrating on tests and just forget all about what I'm doing on my tests and mostly for my regular work that I do in school, sometimes I tend to get it all messy so the teacher can't read it and forget to do it neat and so the teacher docks marks for that. (Grade Six Student)

R: What would you have to do in Art to make that "C" into an "A"?

S: I would have to work harder and...

R: What does that mean, work harder?

S: You need to color in the lines and...

R: So color in the lines and what else?

S: You need to make cutting good and coloring. (Grade One Student)

Another grade three student said, "I'm not a good drawer, so I can't do as good in Art and sometimes I don't know what colors to use so I use different colors."

When asked, "Is Art only drawing?" she replied, "Art is sort of drawing and sort of sketching...and sort of other stuff like coloring, not just drawing, but coloring nice and doing the right colors and stuff." It is interesting that she felt that she had to choose the "right" colors.

The "Right" Answer

As important as getting the "right" color in Art, is at least four students' construction that you must have the "right" answer in order to receive a good mark. This idea was apparent in comments made by the following grade three student, "I got a "B" 'cause my answers probably weren't good enough" and the following grade one student.

R: Why do you think you got an "A" in Math?

S: Because I'm...most times I forget the things, but this time I got the answers right...There were three people that finished their Math book and one of them was me, so probably that's why I got an "A".

R: Oh, because you finished the Math book?

S: And the Math book was all correct.

One grade six student mentioned her frustration with multiple choice tests because then she had to choose the "right" answer, not provide one, and two answers were almost always the same, thus making the decision very difficult.

Brookhart (1994) cites Bateson who stated that although the curriculum had four equally important goals, (attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical thinking), the knowledge goal was one most heavily reflected in the grades. As a teacher/researcher,

I feel that in elementary schools, there is an emphasis on knowledge as facts and rote learning. This may explain, in part, the students' concern with the "right" answer. However, being overly concerned with the "right" answer, often means that students are unwilling to take risks. Smith (1986) states, "Children will not learn if they are not willing to take risks - like giving the wrong answer occasionally" p. 38.

Effort

All seventeen students recognized that effort put into their school work affected their achievement mark. The term that emerged over and over again in student comments was "trying my best" or "try harder" as a way to achieve good marks or improve marks. I wondered what they meant by this phrase and asked them to explain. I assumed they would elaborate by giving me examples of "trying harder" or listing specific behaviors and actions. Most grade one students could do neither, instead, they just repeated the phrase "try harder".

Students felt that "trying hard" was one way to maintain or improve their marks. The amount of effort given to a particular subject area relied on whether the subject was liked by the student. Students in all grade levels mentioned that liking or not liking a subject will affect how well they do in that subject. Evans and Engelberg (1988) found that boys more strongly endorsed the internal characteristics of being interested in a subject as important for getting good grades. In this study, both boys and girls mentioned liking a subject as being a motivating factor in getting a good grade.

The students at all grade levels agreed that effort influenced their achievement marks. The literature suggests that this construction may be quite accurate. Brookhart (1994) states, "Elementary teachers are more likely to emphasize informal and observational measures in grading and to include effort and even improvement in grades. Work habits are an important part of elementary classroom teaching" (p. 296).

Innate Ability or Intelligence

Two grade six students and one grade three student recognized that innate ability (intelligence) affected achievement marks regardless of effort. One grade six student explains in the following comments.

S: Well, effort is, like, how much you try, like if you try really good then you're probably going to get good Achievement marks. Achievement marks, like, how good you do in education, like if you're smart then you get like an "A" or "B", but effort is like, more 'cause if you like, if you get an "E", that means you tried.

R: So do you think it's possible for someone to try really hard and still get a "C"?

S: Yeah, I think so.

R: Why?

S: 'Cause if they're like...uh...some people are like..not very smart and they try, but they just not, they don't get just good, but they still keep on working on it.

R: How do you think those people feel?

S: I think, I...they would feel really bad 'cause they tried, put their best effort into it but just don't get a good mark.

The majority of students in this study believed that if they demonstrated good behavior, did neat work, knew the right answer, and tried hard, they would be successful in attaining a good (high) achievement mark on their report card. Nicholls (1978, cited in Weinstein, 1983) found that, "Younger children do not distinguish between ability, effort, and outcome, and they believe that those who try harder are smarter" (p.299). Some of the older children, although admitting that behavior, neatness, the right answer and effort were important, realized that innate ability or intelligence could be a contributing factor to the achievement mark.

Stiggins (1997) acknowledged the difficulty with understanding what a particular grade means because of the following factors: what was factored into the grade (e.g. achievement, aptitude, effort or attitude), how each component was defined and assessed and what weight each was given in grade computation.

Brookhart (1994) also spoke of the difficulty with achievement marks. She stated,

> In school, pure achievement may be an impossibility. Teachers are supposed to write instructional plans that present students with learning activities at an appropriate level of challenge for the students to grow and to accomplish learning goals. If the students do not participate in the activities, then their achievement is jeopardized....From the point of view of the external assessor, pure achievement may be closely approximated. But from the point of view of the teacher, coach, mentor, or advocate, a student's achievement is confounded with his or her participation in lessons the teacher planned and then implemented (p. 297).

The Importance of Marks

The majority of students in this study felt that marks were important both for themselves and their parents. In fact, for the majority of students, the marks were the most important part of the report card. Most admitted to looking only at the marks and never reading the comments. The comments were perceived to be meant for parents.

There was no consensus on which mark was the more important, the effort mark or the achievement mark. However, there seemed to be more at stake with the achievement mark.

> Separate grades for effort and achievement are used in some school districts....But it is the achievement grades that are central and influential...The achievement grades are the ones that influence important rewards, like honor roll, parental approval, and permission to stay on the football team. The effort grades are not the "real" grades (Brookhart, 1994, p. 297).

Students felt marks were important both for themselves and their parents for the following reasons: to find out where improvement was needed, to provide rewards for students or an escape from punishment, and to provide a good job in the future.

Improvement

The majority of grade six students and one grade one student felt the marks were important to tell them and their parents where improvement was needed. One grade six student explained, "I think it's to show our parents how we're doing in school and like if we're trying hard and stuff and if we need extra help if like, we're

failing or something because maybe we should bring home our binders more often and just do our work" and another grade six student added, "so you can look back and see how you did in your school year and see what you need to improve on and things like that."

Improvement was mentioned by the majority of grade six students, even high achievers as illustrated in the following comments.

R: What would you change?

S: I'd try to do better in all the subjects that I didn't do as well on.

R: But you have all A's.

S: Yes.

R: Explain how you'll do better.

S: I'll try to get all of my marks in the 90's.

For these students, the report card provided an indication of what one must do next, documentation that might be used for setting and measuring goals -- not an end in itself.

Rewards

All but one of the students mentioned being rewarded in some way for good marks on the report card. In some cases, the reward was simply a reprieve from punishment such as being grounded, being sent to summer school or failing the grade and being shipped off to boarding school. Slightly less than half of the rewards mentioned were intrinsic while the remainder were extrinsic ranging in value from a Nintendo system or a new bike to a blizzard from Dairy Queen. The intrinsic rewards

were hugs, kisses and verbal praise such as - "Excellent", "Good job", and "I'm proud of you".

The idea of rewards was a family decision made for various reasons and didn't seem to have any relationship to subsequent high or low achievement, although rewards were presumably used as a motivating factor for getting good grades, as illustrated by a grade one student, "If they (the parents) see all "A's", I think they might take me out for an ice cream cone. If my brother gets all "A's", they'll take me and him out for an ice cream cone."

Kohn (1994) speaks of rewards and their use in motivating students. He explains,

> Scores of studies in social psychology and related fields have demonstrated that extrinsic motivators frequently undermine intrinsic motivation...People who are promised rewards for doing something tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to obtain the reward...studies also show that...people who have been led to think about what they will receive for engaging in a task (or for doing it well) are apt to do lower quality work than those who are not expecting to get anything at all (p. 39).

An Escape from Punishment

In three cases, the grades on the report card played a major role in determining whether punishment would be given or withdrawn. In two of the cases, this seemed to provide the incentive to do well and students spoke proudly of their accomplishments. "Well, I'm proud too, 'cause I don't have to go to summer school or get a tutor over the summer holidays" and "Well, in Science I got an "A", in Math I got an "A", um, I forget what I got "B" in, and um my Mom was really proud of me and Dad. If I had good marks on my report card, I would get a new bike and my

Mom said, actually my Dad said In your future, I see a bike." In the third case, achievement was not altered and the concern was not so much about the grades as about passing onto the next grade. One grade six student explained, "I should try harder next year 'cause my Dad said if I got a "D" on my report card, I'd have to stay back in grade six so all I'm doing now is try to concentrate to beg him to let me go to grade seven 'cause all my friends are going there."

Tom's Story

When Tom thinks of report cards he expresses fear - fear that his marks will not be good enough for the new bike that has been promised. He is concerned that he must measure up to the marks his Mom got as a student or he will be grounded. He does Home Reading every night and practices his Math Mad Minutes.

In May, Tom saw himself as being good in Science and his favorite thing in school was Math and writing stories, although he was sure his teacher would say he was slow in Math. Therefore the reason for the nightly Math drill. After receiving his report card in June, his perceptions were altered. He said, "I got a "C" in LA because I'm not really good at it. I don't like it." When I asked him what he did in LA, he replied, "Writing." There were already plans in place to go to the store and buy a notebook for him to write in over the summer. "Then soon," he says, "I'll be writing neatly again like I was in play school." (Grade One Student)

Future

Billy's Story

Billy is a boy with his eye on the future. His report card is a predictor of the future for him " 'cause it tells me if I'm going to get a good job, if I'm going to be a smart person, if I'm going to make good money and have a good life. When I grow up, I want to be a doctor. That's a good paying job so it would be a good life."

He is counting on good grades to get him that good job. He carries with the responsibility for eventually supporting his parents in their old age as he is the eldest son. He considers himself lucky " 'cause I have good parents, like they help in the education, a good teacher, and I have a good mind."

His parents support and encourage his endeavors. "Well if it's like good, then they say - Very good - if it's like excellent then they hug me and kiss me and stuff and then sometimes I get a treat, too." He elaborates, "If like the first report card I did good, I would get to like, uh, a system, a Nintendo 64 System and I did do good and I did get that, so that inspired me to go on. I also sometimes like to go out for dinner."

He feels he gets good marks, all "A's" except for the "B" in Music by working, studying hard, doing good on tests, using his time wisely, paying attention and not goofing off. Effort is important to Billy.. "Well effort is like how much you try, like if you try really good then you're probably going to get good Achievement marks. Achievement marks, like how good you do in Education, like if you're smart then you get like an "A" or "B", but effort is like more 'cause if you like if you get an "E", that means you tried."

He speaks of report cards telling what you've accomplished. This report card was the best he ever had and he's really proud of it. Before he received it, he expressed nervousness. " 'Cause you ...you don't know what you're going to get, like, it's suspenseful. I feel scared if I don't get a good mark. I, like I'm just not going to ...feel I accomplished my best." (Grade Six Student)

Three students in grade three and three students in grade six spoke of the future and the role good marks play in determining future plans. A student in grade three commented on the importance of good grades; "So it's like, when we grow up we know how to do all this, we know how to do our Math properly like when we have bills to pay when we grow up, we know how to split up the money and stuff."

Overall, most of the students seemed to feel that their achievement marks were very important. Only one student from grade six commented that she did not feel that marks were important, although her parents did. The importance of marks expressed by the students may be in part due to perceived pressure from parents, particularly in the area of rewards and punishments. Evans and Engelberg (1988) state, "Given the press for schooling, children may early learn to give lip service to grades, based upon exhortation, admonition, and injunctions by parents and teachers. Thus, grades may be viewed as critical in the abstract - that is, other people say they are important (p. 48).

Relationship between Marks and Learning

Peter's Story

When asked about report cards, Peter utters two words, "Oh, oh!" He feels that report cards tell how he behaves and what he does at school because "your parents can't be there all the time watching." He speaks of being "tuned-in" this year because his teacher is "strict, strict, strict." He says, "Well, if I start behaving a little bit better, I think I should get a pretty good report card."

He doesn't know if report cards are important, other than to tell you if you failed or what your marks are but his mother thinks they are. His Mom was pleased about the A's he received this year, his first "A's" and gave him lots of hugs. She talks with Peter about the areas he needs to improve. He says, "She doesn't mind the "S" (for effort) but she just hates the "N's."

Peter feels his marks tell how much he got right and whether or not the work was completed. He elaborates, "...I tried hard on that Pourquoi story and I just kept getting it right and then this one time I wrote about a whale and I was writing and the teacher said, You're going to have a lot of work to do tomorrow and I did have a lot of work to do and I got finished and I was down at a "C" and she gave me a "B" because I got my Endangered Species um, what you call, report done and paragraphs, typing on the computer, and then I got those three done." He know a lot about Pourquoi story writing. "....It took me five tries before I had a good story. One of them was good, teacher said it was good, but it didn't have three problems. Like the first one was not supposed to work, the second was not supposed to work and then the third one was supposed to work." When questioned about his "B" in

Language Arts and asking if it represented what he had learned about Pourquoi stories he said, "No."

All the students were questioned about their marks received in specific subject areas. I was interested to see if any connections would be made between the mark received and what they felt they had learned in a subject area. Several students spoke about topics covered in specific subjects, skills learned and behaviors that were necessary to be successful (i.e. receive a high mark) in a subject. Several students at each grade level were asked specifically, "Does this mark tell me what you learned in this subject?" The response from all students questioned was, "I don't know" or "No", the mark did not reflect what was learned.

I wondered how the students were defining learning. Were they defining learning as the knowledge (i.e. facts) and necessary skills presented in a subject area? Most students spoke of specific skills needed in subject areas. For example, in Physical Education students in grade one mentioned throwing and catching the ball and associated their mark with being good at those skills. One grade three student explains her marks and perceived skills, "And for Language Arts, it's not just because of my reading, it's my spelling. I'm not good at spelling and writing stories and for Math I'm not that good at multiplication and division but I'm sort of good at Math -- plus and take away and I just need to work on going faster and I need to try to get to be a better reader 'cause of Problem Solving...and for Social Studies, we did Indians and we did some tests about Indians and we had to read again and I'm not good at

reading and because I don't really understand about Indians and I don't know, I don't understand how they live and stuff..."

When questioned further about a particular mark and why that mark was chosen the majority of students did not speak of subject matter (i.e. knowledge) or necessary skills related to that subject. Instead, they spoke of their effort and their behavior. The older students also talked of completing their homework and studying for tests as well. Students thought it was important to try hard, to get the "right" answer, do a good job and exhibit behaviors they associated with learning such as: listening, participating, and co-operating.

If students defined learning as specific knowledge and skills in subject areas but did not connect their mark with learning but rather with effort and behavior, what are they telling us? Are they confused about the marking system itself or are they telling us that there is a "hidden curriculum" -- one that is not found in curriculum guides but must be mastered in order to be successful in school.

Vallance (1991) defined the Hidden Curriculum as the practices and outcomes of schooling that are not explicit in curriculum guides or school policy although they are a regular and effective part of school experience. The 3 "R's" of the hidden curriculum are rules, regulations and routines and require compliance and obedience. The majority of students in this study seem to feel their marks relied heavily on compliance and obedience. Smith (1986) states, "What they (the students) learn in school is exactly what they are taught" (p. 138).

I believe students are learning all the time, through all of their school experiences. Do good grades on a report card necessarily mean that the student

learned the material? Haley (1988) speaks of the kinds of learning she hopes to nurture as a teacher and answers the question:

> "No...As a teacher, I ask myself what kinds of learning I hope to nurture as well as measure in my students - retention of facts or something beyond that, such as seeing relationships, using thinking skills, foreseeing what comes next, sketching towards more complex knowledge...Of course, we hope that when students get A's, the high mark signifies that they have mastered the material and can apply what they've learned in both practical and imaginative ways. We hope they can use what they've learned in the class where they got the A but also in other subjects and in other aspects of their lives...they probably have also learned how to organize their study habits efficiently and communicate with their teachers to determine what they should do to meet their expectations. They probably also find learning interesting and challenging...The task of teachers and administrators is first to recognize the grading system for what it is and to help students and parents put it into a realistic perspective with true learning. Then it is the school's task to do all things within its power to motivate the student to learn" (p. 36-41).

To categorize students' constructions about grades or marks is a complex matter, just like the grading system itself. I believe that teachers themselves are not really sure what should be included in the mark. Student constructions are formed as they negotiate their experiences with peers, with school personnel and with parents. Definitely, most students agree that marks are the most influential part of the report card. Even though students are not clear about what determines an achievement mark or grade; they know that mark has the power to reward or punish and provide for the future. They just do not know what, if anything it tells anything about their learning.

Haley (1988) states, "The task of teachers and administrators is first to recognize the grading system for what it is and to help students and parents put it into a realistic perspective with true learning. Then it is the school's task to do all things within its power to motivate the student to learn" (p. 47).

In summary, this study has examined the constructions of the report card held by 17 elementary students. The students viewed the report card as being a mysterious document, filled with terminology that is difficult to understand and marks that were unable to be predicted. The students felt the report card was used to monitor their behavior and grade placement for the following year. The report card contained effort and achievement marks. The achievement marks were considered by the students to be most important, because they were used by parents as a basis for rewards or punishments. It was also felt that good achievement marks may possibly lead to a good job in the future.

Chapter Five

Reflections, Implications and Recommendations

Reflections

The purpose of this study was to explore 17 elementary school student's constructions of their final report card. Five students at grades one, six students at grades three, and six students at grade six were selected from one elementary school for this study. Data were collected during two sessions of semi-structured individual interviews with each student, along with researcher field notes. Three major themes emerged; each containing a number of interconnected and interrelated sub-themes. The three major themes comprising students' constructions of the report card were: Mystery -- A Surprise Package, Monitoring, and Marks. The sub-themes under the theme of Mystery --A Surprise Package were the sub-themes of (a) student emotions surrounding the report card, (b) predictability of marks, and (c) confusion about terminology used on the report card.

The theme of Monitoring contained two sub-themes (a) behavior, and (b) promotion or retention.

The most dominant theme that emerged from the data pertained to Marks. This theme explored student constructions of marks (i.e. achievement) in the following areas: (a) who decides the marks, (b) how the marks are determined, (c) the importance of the marks, and (d) the relationship between marks and learning.

As well as the themes there were queries that initially guided my thinking and questioning about students and the report card. These were queries regarding the message the report card gives the students about themselves as learners and as individuals, the meaning constructed from the grades and comments on the report card and the connections students make between their daily efforts, activities and assignments.

The first query concerning the report card and the message it gives students about themselves as learners or as individuals, raised two further questions for me, "What do students think they've learned from their report card?" and "How do they define the term learner?" Neither of these questions was asked during the interviews nor answered explicitly, yet I felt the findings of the study indicated student constructions that pertained to the connection between learning and the report card.

First, several students at grades one, three, and six felt that the achievement marks were not reflective of student learning in specific subject areas. Learning in this case was defined by the students as specific facts or skills required by a subject such as Language Arts or Mathematics. Although the students spoke of what they had learned by listing topics within subjects, such as Flight for grade six Science, most felt their marks were often determined by the use of other criteria such as student behavior, neatness, and effort.

Secondly, the report card seemed to confirm or negate several students' previous constructions of themselves as learners. Confirmation was evident when students were able to predict their final marks. A grade one student had his prior constructions of himself as a learner altered by the report card. Before receiving his

final report card, he talked about and viewed himself as a writer. He said he chose to write stories as a hobby. After receiving a "C" in Language Arts and reading the teacher's comment regarding his writing ability he stated, "I'm not good at writing and don't like it anymore."

Thirdly, the report card told some students that their quest for knowledge did not end upon receipt of the final report card. Some students, especially the high achievers stated that the report card showed them areas where improvement was necessary, even if you were a straight "A" student. The report card also told students if they were well-behaved, hard workers or if they needed to improve in these areas.

This understanding was gained by looking at achievement marks. It was felt by most students that if one had good behavior or tried hard a good achievement mark would result.

Some students identified themselves by the marks they received such as , "I'm a straight "A" student" or "I'm almost a straight "A" student". This identification by marks was more prevalent among the higher achieving students and never mentioned by the lower achievers. Conversely, it was not surprising that those students who received lower achievement marks on a subject would make comments like "I don't like that subject". I believe it is human nature to like areas in which we feel competent and successful and to define oneself by one's accomplishments. The students were merely reflecting this aspect of human nature.

My second query concerning the meaning students construct from the comments and grades led me to believe that most students did not find the teacher comments to be helpful. Perhaps this was due to the fact that grade one students in

particular, and some grade three students were unable to read the comments. The language used was difficult to decode and understand. Two grade six students said they never read the comments. Comments were perceived to be for the parents' benefit by students who did not read them. Only four students, from grade three and six, mentioned reading the teacher comments. The reasons given for reading the comments were because they showed areas for improvement or were complimentary.

As well as containing teacher comments, the report card included school selected, preprinted personal development phrases such as, **Behaves responsibly towards rules and authority** and **Shows determination to do best work.** These phrases were evaluated by the teacher using the criteria of "E" for excellent, "S" for satisfactory and "N" for Needs improvement. These phrases were a source of great mystery to most students, especially those in grade one. They simply did not understand what the phrases meant. Even some of the grade six students struggled with defining them, and were unable to give concrete examples of the behaviors or actions required that would clarify the meaning of the phrase.

It would be interesting to examine teachers' understanding and definitions of these phrases. I wonder if teacher consensus for expected student behaviors and actions as indicated by the personal development phrases could be reached.

Not surprisingly, the marks on the report card were seen to be the most important part of the document for the students. Only three students mentioned the importance of the effort mark, the rest felt the achievement mark was of more significance. Presumably this was because the students felt the achievement mark was

used as a basis for rewards or punishments, next year's grade placement and for getting a good job in the future.

The students felt that the achievement mark was based on criteria such as: behavior, neatness, knowing the "right" answer, and effort. The students stated that the teacher decided what the mark should be by using the identified criteria. Some students also felt the principal played a role in that decision. At least five students from all three grade levels said good grades were partially dependent upon being smart.

Student constructions about the importance of achievement marks is not totally unexpected as we live in a society that practices evaluation at all levels and in many areas of human endeavors. Students involved in organized sports are evaluated on their demonstrated skills and placed on one team or another according to those skills. Records of wins and losses are kept. Other students involved in lessons such as dance, music or swimming pass through stages. At the completion of one stage, students are evaluated and if they demonstrate the required skills, move on to the next stage or level. During my initial interviews with the students, I caught myself using evaluatory language when discussing activities students participated in outside of school. If they mentioned swimming, I asked them what color (Red Cross levels) they were in. If they played a team sport, I asked them how well their team was doing. I believe competition and evaluation pervade our society and students and school are part of that society. Therefore, it is not surprising that achievement marks are very important to students.

My third query addressed the connection between students' daily work, effort, and assignments and the report card. The students across all grade levels made some connection between what was on their report card and their daily work. They all linked effort with achievement in specific subject areas. It was felt that one had to work hard and try hard to get a good report card. Definitions of working hard and trying hard were varied; some were based on behavior while the older students spoke of studying and doing homework.

I believe effort is honored in elementary schools. Students come to school with a wide variety of abilities and skills. One unifying factor by which teachers evaluate their students might be the amount of effort students put into assigned tasks. If it is perceived by the teacher that the student has tried hard and done his or her best on a given task, the ensuing product is generally deemed to be acceptable. Therefore, it is not surprising that students would emphasize effort as having a major impact on the report card.

Most students did not feel the report card reflected what they had learned. Report cards seem to tell the students what it is they had to improve on in particular subject matters or behaviors associated with learning.

This student construction is an area of particular concern to me as an educator. I have to ask myself the following questions: What are students learning in school? Does our system of assessing, evaluating and reporting reflect their learning? This study does not seek to answer these questions, but I believe it is a beginning step. It is important first, to be aware of the need to ask the questions and then, seek an answer with the students' help.

Gender was not a major factor in the responses of the students. It only showed up in two areas; sharing of report cards and understanding of how the achievement mark was determined. Sharing of report cards was also related to age as younger students did not share. Some of the older students in grade six did share their report card but boys shared only if their marks were good. The girls shared regardless. Beyond the Grade One level, more boys than girls thought behavior was the criterion that determined the achievement mark, while girls emphasized neatness.

Some constructions seemed to be consistent with the achievement level of the students as measured by the marks on their report card. The higher achieving students were able to correctly predict marks on future report cards even while using comments like "I hope" or "maybe". High achievers looked to the comments on the report card to show them areas for future growth and took personal responsibility for their marks. In all cases, these students seemed to be "school-wise"; knowing and practicing the kinds of behaviors that would give them high marks. Students who were mid to high achievers were also concerned about the future and some mentioned they wanted good marks so they could eventually find a good job.

Conversely, the lower achieving students felt very strongly that their behavior affected the mark. If you behaved in school, you were more likely to get a good mark. At the Grade Six level, the lower achieving students felt that if there weren't any report cards they would not work as hard or be as respectful.

There were, of course, differences in the students' responses due to age. Constructivists believe that student constructions are based on experiences and negotiated through social interaction and discussion. Some students had more

experiences with a final report card; years in which they have been evaluated by different teachers, each with their own particular philosophy. By being exposed to different philosophies and expectations, the students would supposedly have had divergent experiences. These divergent experiences would be accommodated and assimilated by the student, sometimes causing new constructions to be held.

I believe that student constructions were influenced by what the teacher considered to be important. Each student had received two previous report cards throughout the year. I assumed they based their effort and actions on comments the teachers may have made on those report cards or during the school day. Attainment of a good report card would be partially dependent upon knowing what the teacher considered important and then demonstrating the proper knowledge, actions or behaviors.

I also believe that student constructions of the report card were influenced by their parents and the value and importance they attached to the report card. Parents were seen to have a very strong influence in this study. They were the dispensers of rewards or punishments and made the ultimate decision about their child passing or failing the grade. For the younger children, parents read the report card to the student and so, in essence, were passing on their interpretation of the report cards; the meaning of the comments and marks.

The student constructions of their mark would be influenced by their parent's understanding of marks and the marking system. Waltman and Frisbie (1994) studied Parents' Understanding of Their Children's Report Card Grades. They found that there was a significant amount of variability among parents in how they understood grades

and what was and should be factored into the grade. Parents weren't sure how the grades were distributed. Waltman and Frisbie also discovered that there was "an intolerable level of inconsistency between teacher and parents in the way grades from a given classroom are interpreted" (p. 223). The teacher may mean one thing by a grade and the parent may have a completely different understanding of that grade.

Implications

I believe this study has implications for parents, teachers and administrators. I will examine each section separately.

Implications for Parents

It is my opinion that parents play a very important role in the lives of their children. The students in this study felt their parents had the power to reward them or punish them for their marks and the power to retain them in a certain grade. Some students also felt that their parents held high expectations for them; and expected them to achieve the same marks or better than their parents.

If parents are relying on extrinsic rewards or punishments to motivate their children, they should be aware of research surrounding this area and the negative implications of extrinsic rewards in particular. Studies indicate that children who are promised extrinsic rewards for doing something, tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to obtain the reward.

I also feel it is imperative that parents have a clear understanding of the meaning of the marks and the terminology on the report card as intended by the teacher. There needs to be communication between home and school regarding grading systems, teachers' beliefs and expectations of and for the students. This is

particularly important when students are dependent on the parents to read and interpret the report card for them.

Implications for Teachers

If the students think report cards are all about grades, then teachers must be very clear about what is being communicated by and included in the effort and achievement mark. They must understand what criteria they use to determine the marks and communicate these criteria with both parents and students. Teachers must understand and communicate the marking system to students and include them in the assessment and evaluation process, together with the students developing and determining the criteria to assess and evaluate assignments where applicable.

Communication of expectations, beliefs about learning, assessment, and evaluation to the parents must take place on an on-going basis. This means that teachers must communicate and link the marks to what it is that students are to learn, be able to explain and justify chosen learning activities, and methods of assessment and evaluation. Teachers should examine their teaching practices and make sure they are consistent with personal beliefs about how children learn.

Implications for Administrators

It is very important for administrators to show leadership in the areas of assessment, evaluation, and reporting. They provide the conduit through which board and system policy on assessment, evaluation, and reporting are explained to the teachers and community. Administrators should strive for consistency in reporting and

grading procedures across grade levels by providing training in student assessment and evaluation and time for staff to develop and implement consistent grading guidelines.

Implications for Further Research

This study articulates the implicit constructions of 17 students from Grades One, Three, and Six at a particular time in their lives. These constructions will change as new experiences are gained. It would be interesting to study their parents constructions of report cards and their implications on their child's constructions.

A comparative study of similar aged students in a different school would also be informative as student constructions are based in part on their school experiences.

Although this study did not include special needs students, it would be very interesting to study the constructions held by these students. A study of that nature would require a great deal of sensitivity and consideration on the part of the researcher since these students have probably experienced low or failing marks on their report cards. I believe that sharing personal experiences of failure is difficult and dependent on a feeling of being emotionally safe. A study with special needs students would provide an opportunity for their constructions to become more explicit and their collective voice to be heard.

It would also be interesting to study teachers' constructions of the report card and to compare them with students' constructions in particular areas such as purpose, importance and understanding of language and grading system used. Hopefully, by comparing the constructions between the two groups of people, dialogue and negotiation would develop, creating bridges for communal understanding and practice.

Recommendations

It is not the intent of this study to enter into the debate on whether or not grades should be assigned to elementary students. That debate has been raging on since grades were first assigned in American schools in the early 1900s. It is the intent, however, to make recommendations that will speak to the students' constructions of the meaning of their report cards. Listed below are four recommendations.

1. Students should participate with the teacher in determining the criteria by which their work will be evaluated. They should be allowed to play a role in weighing their work against those criteria. This should work toward developing understanding of the criteria and gives the students a feeling of more control and power over their education.

2. Schools should develop a school-wide grading policy consistent with the school's philosophy and practice; including all shareholders in the development of the policy -- students, parents, staff and administrators. Terms used such as achievement, assessment, evaluation, and learning should be clearly defined and communicated.

3. Teachers should use understandable terminology on the report cards. Like any other institution, the educational system has developed its own language and jargon which can be disconcerting and frustrating to those outside the system. It is imperative to understanding that language used on the report card be as free of jargon as possible. Teachers should explain the terminology used with the students and parents so they understand what is required for improvement if that is necessary. Wiggins (1994) states, "The report card should, above all else, be user friendly:

Parents must be able to easily understand the information it contains" (p. 28). I concur, although I would add students as well as parents must be able to understand the information it contains.

4. There should be on-going four-way communication between teachers, administrators, students and parents. Each is a stakeholder in the assessment, evaluation and reporting process and understandings and concerns should be shared and negotiated. In this way, shared meanings will emerge.

Summary

The purpose of this study has been to explore students constructions of their final report card and make those constructions more explicit for teachers, parents and administrators. It is not enough just to hear their voice; now we, as those who live in relationship with children and students must listen. We must listen as they share their educational experiences with us; enter into a dialogic relationship in which individual meanings are explored, discussed and finally negotiated to be of value or importance for individuals within a culture and culture itself.

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Appendix A

Letter to Parents Explaining the Study

Dear Parents/Guardians,

My name is Thelma Voegtlin and I am a teacher for Edmonton Public Schools, currently on sabbatical. I am attending the University of Alberta, working on my Masters Degree in Education in the area of Curriculum Studies.

In order to fulfill my Thesis requirements, I would like to conduct a study with students to find out their perceptions of their final report card. This is an invitation for your child to be part of that study. To many children, assessment, evaluation and reporting of their achievement remains a mystery and something removed from their control. Currently, in the field of education, we are trying to make educational activities meaningful for students and give them a feeling of control and responsibility for their learning. Therefore, I believe it is important that educators talk with and listen to students to determine the meaning that grades and comments on their final report cards have for them.

Students participating in this study would be talking with me in a conversational style of interview approximately 30 minutes in length. I would like to talk with each student twice - once in mid-June before their final report card comes out and again, in early July, after they have received their final report card. The first interview would be conducted at the school during a time agreed upon by the student, the teacher and myself; during regular school hours. I know that June is a busy time and I don't want the students to miss any testing or special events that are planned. All interviews would be audiotaped for accuracy. The second interview would be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient for parents and students. I ask that students bring their final report card to the interview so we could talk about the information on it. In addition, I would like to make a copy of the report card so I have supporting documentation for student observations and statements. Recognizing that each report card is a confidential document, it would not become a formal part of the Thesis document and would be returned to parents/guardians at

the completion of the project. Only a blank sample copy of a report card will be included.

In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for students in this study, psuedonyms will be used instead of student's names. The name of the school and school district will also be confidential. This study is voluntary and students are free to withdraw at anytime.

The information collected in this study will be shared in my thesis. A copy of my thesis will be in the library at the University of Alberta and available for anyone to read.

Please complete the attached consent form indicating whether or not you wish to have your child participate in this study, and return it to your child's teacher. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to call me at 467-2167. If you require additional information or clarification, I would be happy to arrange a personal meeting with you.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Thelma Voegtlin

Consent Form

I, _____, do give permission for my child, _____

to participate in the study - Elementary School Student's Perceptions of their Final Report

Cards.

_____
(Signature)

_____
(Date)

OR

I, _____, do NOT give permission for my child, _____

to participate in the study - Elementary School Student's Perceptions of their Final Report

Cards.

_____
(Signature)

_____
(Date)

Appendix B

Sample Questions - First Interview

Building Rapport:

1) Tell me about yourself. What do you like to do when you are not in school?

2) Do you take any lessons after school or are you involved in any clubs or sports?

Knowledge about Report Cards:

3) When you hear the word report card, what do you think about?

4) Tell me about report cards.

(Prompts if necessary)
a) Who are report cards for?
b) Why do you get a report card?
c) How do you feel about your report card?

5) What does your report card tell me about you?

6) What do you think will be on your report card?

In relation to - Achievement marks
Effort marks
Comments

7) Who decides what goes on your report card?

8) How do you know what will be on your report card?

Sample Questions - Second Interview

1) Tell me about your report card.

2) Where did this mark come from? What does it mean?

3) How could you make a particular mark higher? lower?

4) What do you like best about this report card?

5) If you were to get a report card without marks - how would you feel?

6) Will you change anything next year?

7) Are good grades important? To whom? Why?

8) Check for understanding of terminology.

Clarify Understanding from first interview - check for similar perceptions/answers.

9) Why do you get a report card?

Appendix C

Riverside School — **Student Progress Report**

Student: Reporting Period:

Grade: Days Absent: Days Late: Date:

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

N S E Behaves responsibly towards rules and authority
N S E Respects others and their property
N S E Works and plays well with others
N S E Expresses feelings in a constructive way
N S E Listens attentively
N S E Follows directions
N S E Organizes and uses materials and class time effectively
N S E Completes assignments on time
N S E Demonstrates a desire to learn
N S E Attempts all tasks
N S E Shows determination to do best work
N S E Works well independently
N S E Participates in small groups
N S E Participates in large groups

LANGUAGE ARTS

Performance
Effort
Grade Level of Achievement

Topics:
Independent Novel Study, Writing questions following Bloom's Taxonomy to elicit answers at higher levels of thinking, spelling, Reading Record books, dictionary work, Journal writing, writing outlines and bibliographies.

_____ is able to clearly state questions and answers at various thinking levels as outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy. She can clearly express her thoughts when relating her own experiences. Her Reading Record book contained accurate responses and analysis of material read. _____ is learning to construct an accurate, well-organized outline and bibliography.

MATHEMATICS

Performance
Effort
Grade Level of Achievement

Topics: Division of Decimals
Measurement
Motion Geometry
Fractions, Ratio, Percent, Averages

_____ is able to perform operations with decimal numbers, including division with decimals. ____ has worked on calculating averages, using multiples and factors to create equivalent fractions, converting fractions to decimals, and identifying ratios and percents. _____ is aware of the different units of measurement, e.g. temperature, volume, time and mass.
_____understands concepts related to motion geometry, grids and graphing, angles, and works with related instruments. _____ has learned how to conduct a survey, tally information and present results using double bar graphs.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Performance
Effort
Grade Level of Achievement

Topics: Unit on Greece, An Ancient Civilization

_____ is able to compare and contrast how basic needs are met in different societies and different time periods. _____ demonstrates the ability to identify the main ideas of who? what? where? when? how/why? in newspaper/magazine articles. _____ is able to respond to the articles by expressing opinions or attitudes towards the event being reported.

SCIENCE

Performance
Effort
Grade Level of Achievement

Topics: Flight, Air and Aerodynamics, Variables
Sky Science

_____ is able to apply principles of flight and air to the design of gliders, parachutes, and hot air balloons. _____ is aware of the different types of variables including controlled, manipulated and responding variables. _____ has a satisfactory understanding of the concepts covered in the Sky Science unit.

FRENCH

Performance
Effort
Grade Level of Achievement

Topics of Study:

ART

Performance
Effort
Grade Level of Achievement

Topics of Study:

HEALTH

Performance
Effort
Grade Level of Achievement

Topics of Study:

MUSIC

Performance
Effort
Grade Level of Achievement

Topics of Study:

Recommendation for Next School Year:

We recommend that _____ be assigned to a year _____ classroom starting September ____, 19__.

Classroom Teacher's Signature: _____

Principal's Signature: _____

Appendix D

PURPOSE OF REPORTING STUDENT PROGRESS

Edmonton Public Schools offers programs that foster excellence in learning and provide each student with an opportunity to be successful. Contact between home and school is supported and encouraged in all schools.

This progress report is designed to provide you with an accurate interpretation of your child's achievement, progress and development at school. If you want more detailed information, or have any questions about the information contained in this report or about programming, you are encouraged to contact the school at your earliest opportunity. Communication about school programs and student achievement and growth is important in the development of students.

Student Achievement
Your child is working to meet expectations of the curriculum in the grade level indicated at the top of the progress report. November and March achievement levels are reported as being **at, above** or **below** the grade level indicated. The final report of the year indicates the grade level of curriculum completed by your child for each course of study.

Student Performance
The quality of performance, or how well your child is demonstrating curriculum expectations is reported by the following rating system:

A: 80-100%
Work meets standard of excellence
B: 65-79%
Work exceeds acceptable standard
C: 50-64%
Work meets acceptable standard
D: 0 -49%
Work does not meet acceptable standard

Effort and Attitude
Your child's motivation for and feelings about learning are reported by the following rating system:

E: Excellent
S: Satisfactory
N: Needs improvement

Teacher Comments
The judgments and comments on this form are based on information gathered from a variety of sources. Your child's achievement and performance are determined from methods which include teacher observations, oral and written tests, performance assessments, teacher-developed tests, district achievement tests, and standardized tests.

Student Goals
Students are encouraged to set goals for achievement and performance to be met by the next reporting period. These goals will be set in discussion with teachers and parents and will comprise part of the conference.

Conference
We conference with all students and parents during the November and March reporting periods. It is an opportunity for students to share and demonstrate some of the knowledge and skills they are learning. As well, information in this report will be discussed and additional information about your child's progress will be presented.

Parent Comments
You are encouraged to use the space provided to share your reaction to this report, pose questions for a future conference, set a goal, or comment on your child's growth.

School Philosophy

At Riverside, we believe that every child can learn. We believe:

- in flexible programming to accommodate individual differences and to provide for student success.
- that learning is an active process which develops, in each child, a quest for life-long learning.
- in a nurturing, supportive environment which will enhance self-esteem and well-being of staff and students.
- in providing opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own learning.
- children learn best in a warm, secure environment with clear, consistent expectation and logical consequences.
- that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect.
- that students, staff, parents and the community work as a team.